

Getting to Know Our Ancestors...

Robert F. Alford

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Robert F. Alford was born in Roane County, Tennessee near the village of Philadelphia on January 28, 1833. He was the sixth of seven children born to Charles Alford and Mary Elizabeth Tipton.

Charles Alford, Robert's father, was born in North Carolina on 30 Sep. 1790 and, as a young man, moved with his family to Loudon County, Tennessee. Mary Elizabeth Tipton, Robert's mother, was born in Harriman, Tennessee, a small town in Roane County on 30 Jun 1795. Charles and Mary married before 1814 somewhere in Tennessee.

About 1814, their first child, John C. Alford, was born in Blount County, Tennessee. William Donald Alford, their second child, was born on March 17, 1817, in that same location. Their third child, Matthew Nelson Alford, was born in Limestone County, Alabama, about 1819. By 1824 the family was back in Tennessee for the birth of their fourth child, Rachel Rebecca Alford. Mashack Tipton Alford, their fifth child, was born on May 23, 1828, in Sevier County, Tennessee, near the Little Pigeon River. Robert F. Alford, the subject of this biography, was born on January 28, 1833, near Philadelphia, Tennessee, and the last child born to Charles and Mary was Sarah Elizabeth Alford, born on June 12, 1837, in Roane County, Tennessee.

Although Robert Alford was not named in the 1840 US Federal Census of Roane County, Tennessee, he has been identified as the child living with Charles and Mary Alford, whose age fell between five and ten years old.

On May 20, 1849, Robert F. Alford married Alsa Evans in Harriman, Tennessee. Alsa was the daughter of Patrick Henry Evans and Rebecca Parks of eastern Tennessee.

On December 8, 1853, in Roane County, Tennessee,

Robert and Alsa Alford had their first child, a boy, who they named William Thomas Alford and called Tom. Three years later, Sarah Elizabeth Alford, called Sissy, was born to them on February 2, 1856, in the same location. In 1857, George Mashack Alford, called Zack, was born there also. These were the only children of Robert and Alsa Alford to be born in Tennessee. However, some of the family, including Alsa, returned to Roane County, Tennessee in the early 1880s.

Some time after 1857, the family relocated to Macoupin County, Illinois, near the town of Carlinville. Robert's parents moved there also. But in 1858, Robert's father, Charles Alford, died in Carlinville, Illinois, at the age of sixty-seven. Robert was named in his father's will and received \$25.14 as did each of the other siblings.

On July 20, 1860, Patrick Mason (Mace) Alford was born to Robert and Alsa Alford in Illinois.

The family was enumerated in the 1860 US Federal Census in Macoupin County, Palmyra Township, including Robert, Alsa, Tom, Sarah, and Zack.

When the family moved to Illinois some time after 1857, they were accompanied by Alsa Evan's brother, Thomas H. Evans. Thomas was a school teacher by trade but with the outbreak of the Civil War, he enlisted in the Union Forces as a Private on August 16, 1861, in the 3rd Illinois Cavalry Regiment, Company L. He engaged in battles at Pea Ridge, Vicksburg and Franklin.

Family history says that Robert F. Alford also served the Northern Army, serving as a spy in east Tennessee.

On April 8, 1862, Rachel Rebecca Alford, called Becky, was born to Robert and Alsa in Carlinville, Illinois.

Less than one year later, on February 18, 1863, Robert's mother, Mary Elizabeth Tipton died in Macoupin County at the age of sixty-seven. Robert was named in her will and received one dollar. There are conflicting explanations about the meager inheritance given to Robert. One side suggested that it was a slight for some unknown reason. The other argument is that Robert had already received his inheritance before his mother's death. This seems more likely since, according to the law at that time, if a child was left out of the will completely, he could legally sue for his portion. The one dollar inheritance superseded that possibility.

On July 31, 1864, Susan Isabelle Alford, called Belle, was born in the same location. Alsa Eveline Alford, called Evie, was born on January 13, 1866, and Robert Henry Alford, called Bob, was born on April 19, 1869.

The family was enumerated again in Macoupin County, Illinois in the U.S. Federal Census in 1870, and on October twenty-third of that year, Charles Parks Alford was born. Then two daughters were born to Robert and Alsa: Minnie Louella on February 20, 1873 and Ida May on May 1, 1875. No other children were born to this family.

Some time after May of 1875 and before August of 1877, the Alfords moved again. Family history suggests that they traveled down the Mississippi River to the mouth of the Red River, which they followed northwest before turning south again and settling in Tarrant County, Texas. They were in that location on August 27, 1877, when Robert's and Alsa's son, Charles Parks, died. He was buried in the Watson Cemetery.

In 1879, a series of events took place that set the entire family into panic and eventually led to its dissolution. It directly involved Tom, Mace and Zack and the killing of two men in a gunfight. Subsequently, Zack was arrested and charged for murder; Mace was charged with murder and Tom was charged with "Theft of a mare." Zack was tried, found guilty and sentenced to five years in the penitentiary; Tom and Mace went into hiding. [See the articles *Why Did the Robert F. Alford Family Break Up in 1880?* and *Case No. 1823 in the Johnson-Alford Connection*, page 56.]

In 1880, the U.S. Federal Census for Tarrant County revealed that much of the family was still intact but by the end of that year or early in 1881, five of its members moved to Alsa Evan's origins in Roane County, Tennessee. The family was never together again after that and the reasons for the dissolution appear to be the following: (1) All monies available from a meager family budget were directed toward the legal fees for Zack

Alford, (2) Other monies were forwarded to Mace and Tom, who were in hiding, (3) The family left the Arlington area and relocated close to Zack in Fort Worth, Texas where they were ostracized as a family of horse thieves and murderers, and (4) Alsa believed that she could find support for her family near her siblings in Roane County, Tennessee, so she returned there with four of her children.

During 1880, Robert Alford hired three attorneys to represent his son, Zack, in the Texas Appeals Court, a process that sent the family into financial and emotional ruin. And, except as he was named in those various court appearances, Robert's location is unknown until 1887. However, tragically, his two youngest children, Minnie Louella and Ida May, died in Tennessee, probably from influenza.

By 1887, Robert's four oldest daughters, Sarah, Rachel, Belle and Alsa, were married and had their own children. His three oldest sons, Tom, Mace and George, had changed their names and relocated in Arkansas and Oklahoma. His wife, Alsa, and his youngest living son, Bob, lived in Roane County, Tennessee. Family history suggests that Robert intended to bring Alsa back to Texas but his untimely death precluded her return.

The murder of Robert F. Alford is one of the most gruesome and distasteful episodes in the history of his family; it is also one of the most mysterious. We will describe the events, the times and the circumstances currently known regarding his killing, based on oral history, personal papers of Margaret Elizabeth McFadin and three newspaper articles.

In December of 1887, Robert F. Alford lived in Burleson County, Texas, and he was alone. His wife and two of his children were living in Roane County, Tennessee; his three oldest daughters were married and lived in or around Tarrant County, Texas; his three oldest sons were living under assumed identities in Arkansas and Oklahoma; and three of his eleven children were dead.

Robert was mining timber in the oak rich lands west of the Brazos River and he had employed several men to work for him, some of them, Mexican.

On Christmas Eve, Robert suspected that his life was in danger, so he hired his four most trusted workers to stand guard for him. He posted two of the men outside to stand guard. The other two men, Mat Petis and a man named Reto, were stationed inside and given pallets to sleep on. With guards positioned appropriately, Robert went to sleep.

Once he slept soundly, Petis and Reto arose and went to his bed. Petis struck Robert first in the neck with an ax, nearly severing his head from his body. Then Reto struck him with the same ax, burying it into his head above his ear. Robert was found ten days later, January 3, 1888, with the ax still in his head.

After he was found, an investigation ensued by the authorities and three of the four men stationed as guards were arrested. The fourth man, Reto, could not be found. The January 10, 1888 issue of the *Austin Daily Statesman* reported the following:

TEXAS BY MAIL... Items and Incidents Culled From the Latest State Papers

R. Alford, living near Caldwell, was found dead on Tuesday, with an ax sticking in his head. Several parties were arrested on suspicion.

On Saturday, 14 January 1888, Petis confessed that he struck the first blow that killed Robert Alford. He also implicated Reto as the one who struck the second fatal strike.

When word circulated in the town about the confession, the sheriff, who knew the feelings sustained in the community regarding the murder, posted guards outside of the jail where the three men were housed.

That night, about 8:30 p.m., the jail was approached by a mob of forty to fifty men demanding admission to the lockup. In some way they got into the jail house. Once inside, two of the three men were shot. Petis was hit four times, and the other one, who also confessed, was shot three times. Both men died of their wounds. The third man managed to avoid being shot. One newspaper article said that the mob was "...unable to open the cage where the prisoners were confined. A Negro confined in the same cage with the Mexicans was ordered by the crowd to push the Mexicans from the cell into the corridor. The Negro succeeded in shoving them out. Then through the bars they were immediately shot, one dead, the other mortally wounded. The Negro was unable to handle the third man, and while scuffling with him in the cell, the guards and other citizens, alarmed by the shooting, put in an appearance, and the crowd dispersed without getting the third man."

Oral family history says, though completely unsubstantiated, that three of the men in the mob were Robert Alford's sons, Tom, Mace and Zack; that the men had sworn an oath to avenge their father's murder and that they were the ones who executed two of the three prisoners.

Twenty to thirty people attended Robert F. Alford's funeral but his burial place is unknown.

At issue is why Robert feared for his life. To take such substantive measures to protect himself, as he did, suggests that his fear was justified. Most oral family history says that it was a revenge killing; for what is not clear. It is possible, though unlikely, that it was connected to the death of George H. White eight years earlier, in which his three sons, Tom, Mace and Zack, were involved.

But revenge killings are usually carried out by the injured party and no connection has been established between Robert's killers, who were Mexican, and the family of George H. White. It is doubtful that one existed. And it is equally doubtful that Alford was killed for his possessions, for moneys or any other valuables because it is not likely that he had anything of that nature.

One newspaper article reported that the men "entered into a conspiracy to kill him." Because of this, a revenge killing cannot be ruled out, especially when one considers how the crime was committed. Petis struck Alford in the neck with an ax; a blow that "...almost severed his head from the body." Certainly, this attack killed Alford, and there was no need for a second strike, which Reto took, if the point was to kill him. That each man struck Alford in turn; that it was a conspiracy; that it was such a savage attack; and that he was left with the ax embedded in his head leads to the conclusion that it was a revenge killing and the injured parties were the men who committed the crime.

The conspiracy and ultimate murder of Robert F. Alford was, as one newspaper article reported, "...for some cause not revealed." This dark and mysterious murder, which took place over one hundred years ago, provides Robert Alford's descendants with more than a handful of questions about his untimely demise.



It seems as though we are letting things slip through the cracks. The photo at left is of Jacob Lawhorn Alford. It should have been included with the article on page No. 50 of AAFA ACTION #56.