

Revisiting the James Black Question After the Flayderman Opus – Or, Do We Know Any More about the Origin of those Guardless Coffins?

Commentary on Relevant Sections of *The Bowie Knife: Unsheathing an American Legend* by Norm Flayderman

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James Black of Washington, Arkansas, has been a problem for knife collectors from the time that Raymond Thorp wrote the pioneering study *Bowie Knife*, first published in 1948. Thorp included the reminiscences of Daniel Webster Jones about Black making a knife for Jim Bowie, then going blind and eventually forgetting his own secret process for tempering steel. Fast on its heels of *Bowie Knife* came the book (1951), and then the movie, *The Iron Mistress* (1952), bringing James Black to the masses as a component of the Jim Bowie legend. In *Bowie Knife* Black was the inventor of the classic cross-guarded, clipped-pointed bowie, which he made for Jim Bowie. *The Iron Mistress* made this role cosmic by having Black forge the blade from a meteorite.

The problem for knife collectors rested in the lack of Black-made knives, or, even, much evidence on Black himself. In “The American Arms Collector,” July, 1957, Ben Palmer performed a thoughtful analysis on the Daniel Webster Jones account (1903) of the James Black story. He pursued evidence for a silversmith in Philadelphia by the name of James Black, but concluded that the artisan listed in 1795 could not be the same person who was born, according to the Jones account, in 1800. He asked a series of questions, such as where are the knives that Black is supposed to have made? Would he have failed to mark his work? He concluded that Jones was not old enough to see Black work before his eyesight failed, and that Jones, a “wide eyed little boy” served as an eager audience to “the blind pauper playing the great man. Later, tales told by a senile old man. Of such stuff dreams are made, and all too often, History.” Palmer left the question open, though, as he earlier stated “It is to be hoped that some documentation on Governor Jones’ James Black dated prior to 1903 can be found. Without it, the whole tales hangs from a very frail thread indeed.”

In articles on Black subtitled “A Man Born to Lose,” (*American Blade*, December 1977/ January-February 1978) Williamson analyzed several Black-related sources, especially exposing problems in Raymond Thorp’s conclusions about Black in *Bowie Knife*. (Thorp erroneously attributed the classic bowie with clipped point and cross guard to Black, ignoring some of his own evidence.) Williamson took the search for Black back a few more years, dismissing the William F. Pope account of James Black in *Early Days in Arkansas* (1895) as based on “very flimsy, if any evidence” and rejecting Black’s 1872 obituary as being influenced by Jones. Williamson became the most influential of the bowie knife collectors, writing many articles and answering questions in a regular column in *Blade Magazine*. Williamson introduced several important knives and knife-

makers to the collecting public in his writings, and he discovered the Edwin Forrest Bowie, which he claimed was given to Forrest by Jim Bowie himself.

Meanwhile, more evidence accumulated on James Black. Joe Musso, Jim Batson, BR Hughes and others found solid documentation that Black lived in Washington, Arkansas, that he married and fathered several children, that he worked as a blacksmith, and that he eventually became a ward of the county, a blind pauper with occasional bouts of insanity. Circumstantial evidence regarding his knife-making accumulated also. His obituaries from 1872 and the reminiscences of Sam Williams stated what appeared to be common knowledge in Washington, Arkansas, that he made bowie knives. Analysis of his estate inventory from 1839 by Batson showed that Black had all the tools and materials necessary for the production of knives – including 31 lbs. of cutlery-grade cast steel, material a conventional blacksmith would not have needed. A daguerreotype from a southwest Arkansas family close to Black was discovered, of two men and their weapons, including distinctive looking knives. A letter from Augustus Garland added information about Black's relationship with the local children, and discussed a specific knife made by Black and given to him by his stepfather Thomas Hubbard. Finally, an article from the 1841 Washington (AR) *Telegraph* directly attributed the “invention” of the bowie knife to James Black. I summarized these findings in a couple of articles: “The Carrigan Knife: the Key to the James Black Mystery” in *Knife World*, December 1992, and “Arkansas and the Toothpick State Image” in *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Summer 1994.

In the marketplace of ideas folks exchange information and interpretations to further understanding of one issue or another. While there have been a few critical letters and comments regarding James Black, there have also been informative articles from Jack Edmundson, Bill Wright and Jim Batson. Then Norm Flayderman produced his monumental study of the bowie knife. *The Bowie Knife: Unsheathing an American Legend* (2004) is the most comprehensive documentation of the bowie knife ever presented. It seems that Flayderman followed up on every published citation regarding the bowie, and found a bunch more. He also brought an engaging writing style – an appropriate vehicle for his healthy skepticism, born, I'm sure, of his experience as an antique arms dealer as well as a scholar of the knife. Knife collectors are always advised to buy the knife, not the story. Flayderman has heard more than his share of stories (and, perhaps, has sold a few!) and has learned to be cynical in the process. Flayderman's skepticism takes on Lucy Leigh Bowie, the Edwin Forrest knife, the Bart Moore knife, James Black and other targets. He spends several pages on Black.

In the wake of this landmark study seems to be the right time to revisit the James Black question. But first I'd like to acknowledge that for some folks this is an exercise of wasted time and energy. Either they have made up their mind for good – one way or the other – or they have decided that the issue is irrelevant to the modern world – who really cares? I have the most sympathy with the latter category, and urge those therein who have gotten this far in this little treatise to stop and find something else better to do! For those who wish to persist, thank you for your patience. I'd like to delineate the elements of Flayderman's critique of Black and see if we can draw any conclusions.

1. The assertion that James Black invented the bowie knife is easily refuted by content early in Flayderman's book which notes that the “first bowie knife” – the one used at the Sandbar Duel – was “made by” Rezin Bowie. (68)

2. Flayderman quotes a story in the *Washington Telegraph*, of December 8, 1841, attributing the invention of the bowie knife to Black. “The *Telegraph* was the first newspaper in Washington, Arkansas, established the previous year, 1840. It is unreasonable to believe that it took possibly as long as thirteen years (since the Sandbar affair) or at a bare minimum, five years (since Black was declared incompetent), for a small community, as Washington, to recognize the local blacksmith’s fame. Nor has yet been found that any other Arkansas newspaper or publication printed in 1841 or earlier acknowledged James Black for his association with so illustrious a name and fame as James Bowie and the Bowie knife. Read in that context, the *Telegraph* story does not carry the weight or certainty or reliability.” (444-445)
3. Flayderman suggests that Black’s mental illness is the key to Black’s bowie knife story. “...there is the strong possibility that the entire saga may have originated from the mentally deranged blacksmith himself, conceived and fantasized during all those unfortunate years as a ward of the state.” (445)
4. Flayderman notes the absence of marked knives. “...to this day there is no known knife bearing his name that is proven authentic, nor positively identified as the work of James Black. Neither is it proven beyond doubt that he even made a knife *of any type!*” (445,447)
5. Flayderman summarizes that William F. Pope “...added wearily to the growing storehouse of unfounded, often senseless, Bowie lore.” (447)
6. Flayderman takes on the Daniel Webster Jones account, which is the most quoted story of Black: “Most of it does not square with the known facts, and was obviously hearsay, very likely told to him by Black himself, who, in all likelihood, continued suffering from severe dementia.” Jones was only three when Black joined his household, his own children did not return to care for him, Black became a “master yarn spinner” and the “centerpiece of this magnum opus/mother of all Bowie knife tales, was the promise to relate to them, one day, his ‘secret of tempering steel.’” (447-448)
7. Flayderman critiques the Augustus Garland account: “When read in its entirety, the narrative becomes less convincing. Not only are many established facts, such as Jim Bowie’s physical size, his family background, the cause of Black’s blindness, and the like, misrepresented by Garland, but only by the furthest stretch of the imagination could other anecdotes be believed.” (450)
8. Flayderman discusses the group of coffin-handled knives: “Much of the strength of their [the group of coffin-handled knives often attributed to Black] origins as the product of the Arkansas blacksmith rests on the Jones and Garland accounts. Both should be read in their entirety and logically reasoned for believability....Although claimed by some that the facts are irrefutable, the issue has yet to be resolved.” (450-451)

As does any good polemicist, Flayderman shrouds the objects of his skepticism with qualifiers of doubt and uncertainty. He includes comments and asides questioning the veracity of sources on Black, and on the believability of Black himself – “dimmed

memory,” “legend and myth,” “questionable,” “lack probability and plausibility,” “outrageous saga,” “groundless anecdotes,” etc., often grouping all sources in the same unreliable category. But the above points seem to be a reasonable summary of the substance of Flayderman’s argument, and each source on Black had an agenda and access to information that can be considered individually. If I may, let me offer some commentary on the points and the related sources.

1. *The assertion that James Black invented the bowie knife is easily refuted by content early in Flayderman’s book which notes that the “first bowie knife” – the one used at the Sandbar Duel – was “made by” Rezin Bowie. (68) A few Arkansas sources attribute the “invention” of the bowie to James Black, or they claim that the only “real” bowie knives were made by Black. This is a statement of exclusivity in the definition of bowie knives that I certainly wouldn’t agree with, but the perspective of these authors was understandably provincial around the turn of the 20th century. That being said, neither Daniel Webster Jones, Augustus Garland nor William F. Pope claimed that Black made the Sandbar Duel knife that Jim Bowie used in 1827. Jim’s brother Rezin, in an 1838 response to a letter on the origins of the bowie knife from “PQ,” declared that he, himself, made and gave to Jim a hunting knife, which Jim used in the Sandbar Duel. He acknowledged that subsequently “experienced cutlers” “made improvements in its fabrication and state of perfection...” If one defines the first bowie knife as the knife carried by Jim at the Sandbar Duel, then Rezin, by his own account, is the inventor of the bowie knife. But if one defines the bowie knife in terms that distinguish it from a simple hunting knife, then the first of the “experienced cutlers” must have “invented” the bowie. (Actually I agree with Flayderman that the bowie is not an invention. Those in Arkansas who claim that Black invented the bowie are wrong in using that term. I think that he was just one of the early and influential makers. It is also my argument that stabbing someone with a hunting knife doesn’t turn the knife miraculously into a bowie, even if the knife is wielded by Jim Bowie. I suggest elsewhere that at least in their first couple of decades, bowies were distinguished from hunting knives or butcher knives. I would further add that the bowie would have existed even without the presence of the Bowie family, it would have just gone by a different name. The Sandbar Duel was a watershed event not for the presence of the knife, but for its naming – but I can argue about these things later!)*
2. *Flayderman quotes a story in the Washington Telegraph, of December 8, 1841, attributing the invention of the bowie knife to Black (70 and 445). “The Telegraph was the first newspaper in Washington, Arkansas, established the previous year, 1840. It is unreasonable to believe that it took possibly as long as thirteen years (since the Sandbar affair) or at a bare minimum, five years (since Black was declared incompetent), for a small community, as Washington, to recognize the local blacksmith’s fame. Nor has yet been found that any other Arkansas newspaper or publication printed in 1841 or earlier acknowledged James Black for his association with so illustrious a name and*

fame as James Bowie and the Bowie knife. Read in that context, the Telegraph story does not carry the weight of certainty or reliability." (444-445) Flayderman argues here that the lack of notoriety and acclaim in his home state is damning to the claims made for Black. But is it unreasonable to believe that it took as long as it did for his community to recognize his fame? How does a community recognize fame, anyway? Does fame have to appear in the newspaper to be realized? In a town of maybe 400 in which everyone knows everyone else, isn't reputation a part of the community's common knowledge, as is information about which smith does the best work, who is the most eligible bachelor, and who makes the best pies? Although he acknowledges that the *Telegraph* was only established in 1840, Flayderman seems to want it to have chronicled Black and Bowie a decade earlier. If we use his own reliance on Rezin Bowie's account of the bowie knife as an example, eleven years after the fact is a reasonable expanse of time for the source of a knife to be documented (from the Sandbar Duel in 1827 to 1838). Some have suggested 1830 as a possible time when Jim could have gotten a knife from Black – and the newspaper documented it in 1841, eleven years later.

But timing is a reasonable object of question, and, while this is speculation, Flayderman notes that on October 25, 1841, Black's children were apprenticed to their grandfather William Shaw until the age of maturity. Everyone in town would have been aware of the domestic drama – Black's and Shaw's disagreements, Anne Shaw Black's death, Black's blindness, and the subsequent disposition of the children. Maybe the editor of the *Telegraph*, James Jett, wanted to acknowledge Black as consolation to his trials and tribulations – and official loss of his children – when he wrote the article a few weeks after the court's judgment.

What about the account seems uncertain or unreliable? Aside from the assertion that Black invented the bowie and that he subsequently became blind, there are hardly any additional facts in the account to challenge, just the comment that making knives "afforded the means of a comfortable subsistence..." and, indeed, Black's estate, probably diminished from when he was actively working, totaled \$1881.13 in 1840 and included three slaves and forty acres of land. He made a comfortable living doing something! Certainly this account relies in no way on the Jones or Garland stories, Jones being a toddler and Garland a boy, so it becomes a different line of evidence. Dismissal of this source assumes that the editor would print something he knew to be questionable – or something a simple inquiry to anybody in town could have cleared up – and that an entire community would "wink at" the lie. That seems a stretch to me, given the social politics of small towns. Someone on the Shaw side of things – or someone who just liked facts! – wouldn't have let that happen.

I might disagree with Flayderman and assert that this is a very early attribution, the earliest attribution of the "invention" of the bowie beyond the family, before the stories associated with bothers John and Stephen Bowie, and significantly earlier than the Rees Fitzpatrick and Noah Smithwick

attributions. And Flayderman's "most important letter in Bowie-dom" (the Rezin Bowie letter of 1838) doesn't contradict the *Telegraph's* account, if one can entertain the premise (if only for a minute) that the first bowie is not Rezin's hunting knife, but rather one made by an "experienced cutler." We will see later that Rezin might have actually accepted the proposition that one of these cutlers was from Arkansas.

I would also suggest this was early considering Bowie's own reputation. While martyrdom at the Alamo had established him as a hero, memory was still present in Arkansas to the legal problems which came from the infamous "Bowie claims," forged claims to acreage there. Bowie is an "illustrious" name now, but through much of the 19th century not everyone felt pride at the association with Jim Bowie or bowie knives. We might remember that the motivation for Rezin Bowie's letter of 1838 was his offence at the association of violence with his family – he was not taking offence at an "illustrious" reputation. In Arkansas, violence was an embarrassment, as was the reputation as the "toothpick state." (As late as 1889 a visitor to Arkansas wrote: "There is a popular notion that Arkansas is a 'bowie-knife' State, a lawless and ignorant State.")

To return to the *Telegraph* piece, a majority of its space chronicled in dramatic but not unrealistic terms the horrors brought by the use of the bowie knife – it didn't much glorify Black or Bowie. The *Telegraph* article seems to be an early and not unreasonable statement.

3. *Flayderman suggests that Black's mental illness is the key to Black's bowie knife story. "...there is the strong possibility that the entire saga may have originated from the mentally deranged blacksmith himself, conceived and fantasized during all those unfortunate years as a ward of the state."* (445) Black did have fits of insanity, and, in 1870 lost reason altogether, from the Jones account. But, if we can believe anything of the experience of Jones and Garland (not their version of what they were told by Black, but what they themselves experienced about Black and wrote about later) the blind blacksmith offered "kindness and fatherly advice" to the children, slept in the same room as the children, was "universally respected" in Washington, judged children's debates, even refereed "controversies among the old settlers," etc, etc.

He was a ward of the county, but seemed still to be integrated into at least a part of the community. Certainly parents trusted their children with him. This suggests that he was not always pitied and isolated, trapped in a fantasy world. Just as impaired folks in today's world don't want pity, they want a chance, Black seems to have been given a chance, and taken it. He no doubt had "fits of insanity," as the legal documents said, but he and the community coped with them until his going over the edge in 1870. Did his fits of insanity alter or elaborate on some of the stories he told? Maybe. But if his basic bowie knife story was a bald-face lie, wouldn't someone in the community have pulled the young people aside and let them know that what Black was saying about the bowie knife was the figment of his deranged imagination?

While I'll talk more about Jones and Garland, these were smart boys – definitely a good audience for Black, but also not without critical abilities. Garland went on to be Attorney General of the United States, with an excellent reputation as a legal thinker, for whom skepticism was a valuable tool. To have these stories based solely on insanity requires that the adult population of Washington conspire to hide the truth.

4. *Flayderman notes the absence of marked knives. “...to this day there is no known knife bearing his name that is proven authentic, nor positively identified as the work of James Black. Neither is it proven beyond doubt that he even made a knife of any type!” (445,447)* Ben Palmer first raised this issue – where are the knives? Where is the James Black maker's mark? The short answer is that not every artist and artisan marked his or her work. “Why not?” is a logical response, especially in these days when everyone wants credit for and profit from everything, and is willing to sue to get them. A mark was basically an advertisement. It was an “I made this” meant to be seen by a potential market. Who doesn't advertise? Used to be a lot of people didn't. Lawyers, doctors, even a large chocolate company. Why not? Because they didn't need to. It's remarkable to my modern sensibilities that so many fine 19th century portraits painted by itinerant artists are not signed. They didn't need the advertising because they knew that they would be moving on, and they also didn't necessarily see their work as “fine art” but simply making a living. Black wasn't trying to sell in big city markets, his customers came to him, and just as everyone knew who made the best pies, everyone in town knew who made knives. It would have cost Black money and trouble to get a good stamp, and, if he didn't need one, why should he bother marking his knives? Every bowie knife lover knows of some fine unmarked bowies.

The second assertion, that there is no solid, air-tight evidence that Black made knives is true, and is why I'm going through this exercise of evaluating the circumstantial evidence which, in my mind, suggests that he did.

5. *Flayderman summarizes that William F. Pope “...added wearily to the growing storehouse of unfounded, often senseless, Bowie lore.” (447)* Pope's account of Black was clearly based on oral tradition, though not necessarily on Garland's, as Flayderman asserts. Garland's chronicling of Black came in response to Pope's book, but Garland didn't take any credit for being the source, hadn't seen his friend for “a long time,” and, as a matter of fact, challenged Pope's negative attitude toward the bowie's place in Arkansas history. Be that as it may, Pope spent most of the citation talking about Black making a knife for Rezin, not Jim.

Now some of the details are likely inspired by folklore, but recent scholarship by Jim Batson argues that Black did make a knife for Rezin, which he gave to Thomas Tunstall, who, in turn, gave it to Sheldon Kellogg. This argument is based upon a reminiscence of Kellogg – in the collection of the Ohio Historical Society – written for his children, and documenting his

life as a merchant in Cincinnati and a trip he took to Arkansas in 1834 to settle some accounts. Kellogg had no axe to grind regarding James Black (he might not have even heard of Black) – his is a story of being given a knife by Tunstall, who said that it was from Rezin Bowie. Batson documents close neighborly connections between John Bowie and Tunstall in Chicot County, Arkansas, making a good argument for the plausibility of the story. Kellogg was not a promoter of Arkansas or of Black. But he treasured the association with the Bowie family so much so that the Kellogg family decided to document the knife's history on the knife itself. By chance the knife came back to the state in the collection of Saunders Museum in Berryville, Arkansas. Col. "Buck" Saunders was a well-known marksman and collector of firearms, especially. The interesting thing about the knife is that without a doubt, it came from the same shop as the Carrigan knife. Flayderman doesn't argue on this last fact.

Rezin Bowie proved to be generous with bowie knives. He gave away the work of several well-known makers, so it is logical that we find one he gave away that appears to be made by Black. Pope and Garland said Black made a knife for Rezin, and, very possibly, here it is!

6. *Flayderman takes on the Daniel Webster Jones account, which is the most quoted story of Black: "Most of it does not square with the known facts, and was obviously hearsay, very likely told to him by Black himself, who, in all likelihood, continued suffering from severe dementia." Jones was only three when Black joined his household, his own children did not return to care for him, Black became a "master yarn spinner" and the "centerpiece of this magnum opus/mother of all Bowie knife tales, was the promise to relate to them, one day, his 'secret of tempering steel.'" (447-448)* Flayderman's point is made in a sense by Jones himself. After mentioning incidents of the early days discussed by Black, Jones said "I have often regretted that I did not write them down..." Jones' story can be criticized for not being more timely, and the passage of time does affect the memory. Jones was not a witness to the making of knives, but he was told stories and he wrote them as he later remembered them. Later correspondence with Lucy Leigh Bowie (quoted in the Palmer article) suggests that Jones did no research on Black, just wrote from memory. What he heard from Black is hearsay evidence, but does most of it not square with the known facts? Certainly there is much information that is not substantiated by outside sources, but very little that is contradicted.

Census information squares with the date of birth given by Jones: 1800. Jones asserts that Black apprenticed to a "manufacturer of silver-plated ware named Henderson" in Philadelphia. While apprenticeship records are incomplete in Philadelphia for the period in which Black claimed to work there, one of the very few silverplaters documented in Philadelphia was named Stephen Henderson. Apprenticeship to a silverplater becomes interesting when we note that knives attributed to Black have plating. Very few bowies have such plating, and there doesn't seem to be a functional reason to add silver at the ricasso (maybe to help anchor the blade in the

sheath?) but if the maker was trained as a plater and was looking to fancy-up his knives, why not? Regarding Jones' memory of Black claiming a lack of "sufficient tariff" to support the plating industry – one of the reasons why he moved west – one can certainly argue that the Tariff of 1816 placed a comparatively low duty on gold and silver wares and plate.

To return to the question of Jones as a reliable source, in his communication with Lucy Bowie as quoted by Palmer, he said that he didn't know whether Augustus Garland had owned a Black knife and wasn't sure where any Black knives were. He had done no research. So his reference to plating wasn't based on his looking at a knife and trying to tell the story to fit the knife, it was simply retelling the story as he had heard it. The Henderson/Philadelphia plater part of the Jones account isn't contradicted by other sources, and it is reinforced by the presence of the Carrigan knife, as we shall see.

The Jones story tells the courtship drama of Anne Shaw and James Black, and, while some of it might be embellished, the basic facts are accurate. The Jones account said that Black returned to Washington in about 1830 and married Anne, while they actually married on June 29, 1828. Anne died in 1835 not '37 or '38 as Jones said. Admittedly Jones related the drama between Anne's father and Black from Black's perspective, but there is plenty of substantiation in the court records to bolster the general account.

The Jones account is fairly accurate as to those things documentable through the public record. Again, it's clear that Jones was not trying to write a history, for he could have gone back to the early newspapers and official documents and found the precise dates of weddings and deaths, etc, but he was simply relating Black's story as he remembered it being told, information which turns out to be not too far off from the public record.

What is left is the bowie knife related information. Jones claims that Black was already making knives when Jim Bowie came and ordered one. Jones makes the point that, even though he made knives already, it was only after making one for Jim (and after Jim killed three desperadoes with it) that folks started asking for ones "like Bowie's" which in popular use was shortened to "Bowie knives." (The desperado story was published early in the Bowie lore, and was hearsay even when Jones heard it. The logic of calling them bowie knives required some dramatic association, I suppose.)

Black was so proud of the temper of his blades that Jones says "Black undoubtedly possessed the DAMASCUS secret." If Black had said this about himself Jones wouldn't have used the qualifier. Jones was looking for a way to emphasize how wonderful the knives must have been. The idea of a secret process is not surprising, for Black worked as an apprentice, and through apprenticeships the secrets of a trade were preserved. It was a question of quality and competition – in Europe controlled by the guilds – and if the trade held its processes in secret, the initiated (those who had been through an apprenticeship) would always have a job. By the mid-19th century the apprentice system in the United States had been supplanted by the factory system, but Black held onto the form of claiming to maintain secrets. Jones

says that Black happened upon the secret of tempering, held the secret like a protective master smith, and then, wanting to give something back to the family who cared for him, he decided to share it in 1870. The motivation is understandable to express his gratitude in this way, but Black couldn't remember his tempering process and slipped into insanity. Jones writes with a dramatic flair, but his account shouldn't be dismissed simply because it reads like a "Victorian melodrama." Life can be dramatic and can be told dramatically. Where are the obvious inconsistencies Flayderman finds?

The best place to look for inconsistencies is in the two major Black accounts: the Jones and the Garland. Garland was several years older, and his contact with Black can be dated earlier. Whatever Jones got was the product of a long relationship and a later more refined version of Black's story. Garland claims that Black's exposure to the fire in his shop caused his loss of eyesight. Jones attributed it to a beating from Shaw. While this shows the oral tradition at work, they agree that Black did go blind and it is possible that both factors might have contributed. (A court document exists that supports the beating theory). Garland has Bowie giving Black a pattern for a knife which Black executed and then Rezin wanted one. Jones says that Black made two knives – one of Jim's design, one of Black's – and that Jim chose the one designed by Black. Garland mentions nothing of the plating, while Jones notes that Black could plate the knives with precious metals adding additional value and requiring a higher price. Garland accurately notes that Black was a ward of the county in the Jones home, and Jones omits that fact from his account, maybe wanting to get a little more credit for his family's generosity. These are inconsistencies, but comparatively minor ones not affecting the basic theme of the story. Also comparatively minor considering that these men wrote long after the fact. And, not to belabor the point, but from the references to Jones' letter to Lucy Bowie in Palmer's article, it is clear these are two independent sources, not drawing upon each other, but only upon the memory of each man. Garland wrote his account in 1895, but it wasn't published until 1908, well after Jones wrote in 1903. Garland could not have read the Jones account, and, by his own testimony, Jones didn't know of Garland's.

7. *Flayderman critiques the Augustus Garland account: "When read in its entirety, the narrative becomes less convincing. Not only are many established facts, such as Jim Bowie's physical size, his family background, the cause of Black's blindness, and the like, misrepresented by Garland, but only by the furthest stretch of the imagination could other anecdotes be believed."* (450) As mentioned in #6, there are some discrepancies between Jones and Garland, but not in the basic story. Does Garland "misrepresent" the information – that is, does he lie about Black – or is his story just his memory of what he was told? The biggest problem from Garland's account is calling Jim Bowie a "little fellow." No one else has ever called him a little fellow. His other descriptions are not inconsistent with what we know of Bowie – he traveled, engaged in land speculation, was pleasant and courteous,

and “would not take the shadow of an insult and not give one.” I can only suggest that this is one place where the oral transmission broke down – perhaps Garland had found some kind of similarity of Black’s description of Bowie with Garland’s own experience with his “poor friend Jim Finley” and ended up generalizing about Bowie’s size too. Again, this was hearsay Garland was relating.

While Flayderman has a hard time with the other anecdotes, much of this account is of Garland’s own experience, and is actually quite plausible and consistent with the facts, where verifiable. Garland states that his stepfather gave him a Black knife in 1853, upon his entrance into the bar. We know he did enter the bar then, and the knife he says he was given does exist. His stepfather was Thomas Hubbard, who resided in Washington, Hempstead County, as early as September of 1830, while Black was active having children and running a business. As an old-timer in Washington, Hubbard would have had to be aware of whether Black was lying about making knives. If Black was lying, would Hubbard, who became both a prosecuting attorney and judge, go to the trouble of finding a knife to give to Garland and then of lying about its provenance? Would he run the risk of another old-timer – or his own stepson – catching his lie? And what a coincidence that if he did go out and find a knife and fabricate the story, the knife he found had plating on it and was identical to ones in a southwest Arkansas daguerreotype and another acquired in Arkansas by a merchant from Cincinnati! As to the gift itself, the logic of it is sound. Garland learned the law from Hubbard and his entry into the bar was a huge event for both men. The gift of a knife associated with Garland’s formative years would be a thoughtful way for Hubbard to acknowledge the transition of his stepson into his chosen profession. Would Garland remember such a special gift after forty years? Why wouldn’t he, especially since he was an active hunter who used the knife regularly?

As to other information in the Garland account, Dr. George W. Lawrence’s stories about Bowie are hearsay, but regarding something that we can verify, Dr. Lawrence did follow Dr. William J. Hammond to Hot Springs, Arkansas. And as mentioned above, he rightly notes that Black was a ward of the county in the Jones home.

Another anecdote that Garland includes concerns a cabinet meeting when Garland displayed his bowie knife. This story represented the height of folly for Bill Williamson, having President Cleveland quake at the sight of Garland’s bowie. Garland relates how the President was considering pardon of a man who committed a crime with a bowie knife. Garland states how the knife pictured did not look like a bowie. (Earlier in his account he says “It is funny indeed to see some of the big knives up and around here which they call Bowie knives!” Garland is using his own rather small but nicely made knife as the model for a real bowie, holding to his definition that only Black made bowies.) Garland claims that the President Cleveland “looked as if he would jump out the window...” upon seeing Garland’s knife. The point that Williamson ignored was the magic of the real McCoy, no matter its size. The

President and his cabinet were impressed by seeing what they believed to be the real thing. (I might offer an example from my own experience. Bill Williamson, himself, was not a large and imposing man physically, but anyone who ever talked with him about knives knows he was “the real McCoy” and could be daunting beyond his modest stature.)

Garland’s account does not include the story of the plating of the knives by Black. That is one detail that he didn’t carry in his memory, or wasn’t informed about. But the knife he was given, which he passed on to James K. Jones, has plating. This reinforces the fact that Garland’s and D. W. Jones’ accounts are based upon independent memories and that Garland was not trying to justify his knife as a Black knife. It was never a question for him. Here the Jones line of information reinforces the Garland line – Jones wrote of plating but knew of no existing Black knives, Garland’s knife has plating.

Finally, regarding Garland, his motivation for discussing Black and the bowie came directly from his reading Pope’s book. Pope thought that the association of the bowie knife and the Arkansas Traveler with Arkansas hurt the state’s reputation. Garland wanted to make the point that these things were a part of history and should be preserved.

8. *Flayderman discusses the coffin-handled knives themselves: “Much of the strength of their [the group of coffin-handled knives often attributed to Black] origins as the product of the Arkansas blacksmith rests on the Jones and Garland accounts. Both should be read in their entirety and logically reasoned for believability....Although claimed by some that the facts are irrefutable, the issue has yet to be resolved.” (450-451) As Flayderman says, “All are near identical with numerous variations in size, dimensions, and slight variances in the ornamentation of their silver mountings. All are believed made by the same hand.” (447) Flayderman acknowledges here what some other writers have not, that these knives are similar enough to be attributed to the same shop. Bladesmith and historian Jim Batson is in a unique position to judge such a similarity and he agrees. Even when compared to other guardless coffins, such as made in Sheffield, or by Rose of New York, or any other maker, this batch is distinctive in material, design and construction, and all are unmarked.*

The Carrigan Knife, the one given to Augustus Garland, is one of the best documented knives around. True, we don’t have the bill of sale, but we have written documentation from owners. In 1895 Garland offered direct testimony, not hearsay, of his being given the knife in 1853 by his stepfather Thomas Hubbard and of using it in hunting over his lifetime. Do we have reason to suggest that he is lying here? He must have gotten the knife somewhere. The hearsay testimony he presents is that the knife was made by James Black. Clearly Garland thought it was, and, just as clearly, Hubbard thought it was, as discussed above. And Hubbard was in a position to know as well as anyone living in 1853. In 1919 the knife was illustrated in the newspaper and attributed to Black. How many well-known bowies have been pictured so early? Before it was given to the Historic Arkansas Museum, the

knife was in only two families – the Hubbard/Garland family and the J. K. Jones/ Carrigan family – and written about by both.

The distinctive characteristics of these knives are that they are guardless, with coffin-shaped handles of burlled walnut, wrapped in coin silver, often with plating on the ricasso. Flayderman says "...there is no dissention that the knife [his own guardless coffin illustrated on page 446] and others of its style are among the very earliest known..." Such an early knife was copied by American knifemakers and, especially by cutlers in Sheffield. The coffin-shaped handle remained very popular throughout the heyday of the bowie knife. The silver wrap became a popular feature of many knives. Even the plating of the ricasso can be found on American and Sheffield examples.

One might ask how a cutler on the frontier could have such an impact, for that is what is being argued here. Batson's study of the Kellogg memoir can serve as an example of how such a thing could happen, outside of the Arkansas-based sources of which Flayderman is suspicious. Kellogg took a knife associated with one of the Bowie family back to Cincinnati in 1834. In 1835 Marks & Rees became the first cutlers to advertise the sale of bowie knives in a newspaper, and they are knives with coffin handles and silvered ricassos "finished in a superior style." Kellogg was a well-known merchant who undoubtedly talked of his travels and showed off his Bowie-related knife. Marks & Rees, just blocks away from Kellogg's store, would have listened to Kellogg, seen his knife, and enhanced the design with their own "superior" style. We cannot prove this connection, but that is likely the way design concepts, and even the name of the knife, spread.

What about the Sheffield connection? Flayderman is not willing to decide from whence the design came. But logic tells us that these coffin-handled knives were of American origin. Sheffield had a cutlery manufacturing system in place, but there was no market for bowie-styled knives in Britain. One goes into a new market with what one knows will sell by copying what is already selling. Witness Japan's manufacturing of American-inspired consumer goods in the decades after World War II. So the cutlers in Sheffield were keenly interested in what was selling in America, and some went to the trouble of precisely copying what was being carried here. Then, as soon as they had a handle on the market, cutlers of Sheffield felt free to innovate. English travelers flowed up and down the Mississippi River, as did knife-wearing Americans. A Black-styled knife could easily be acquired as a curiosity by an English gentleman with contacts in Sheffield, and be in England within a couple of months.

There are Sheffield knives which are close copies of these early bowies. Jonathan Crookes made a copy, but three others are even closer. The so-called Tahchee knife first illustrated by Robert Ables – with the (Crown) Alpha mark of Samuel Harwood, a Sansom & Harwood knife on display at the Historic Arkansas Museum, and a smaller example marked Graveley & Wreaks recently given to the museum by the Schueck family, are copies of the guardless coffin Flayderman illustrates. They are in a category different from the Crookes guardless coffin, the Rose, one by Ames, etc. The three Sheffield

examples display silver plate and have other characteristics only shared by the unmarked early knives under discussion, and two feature the Graveley & Wreaks mark. In 1836, when one visited the Graveley & Wreaks showroom in New York, the knife marked “Arkansas toothpick” on the blade was this guardless coffin (still present on the “Tahchee” knife) while other knife forms in the store carried other slogans, and were advertised as “Bowie,” “Texas,” and “Hunters” knives. The guardless coffin was advertised as an “Arkansas” knife. Someone thought there was an Arkansas connection! And speaking of Tahchee, this Cherokee chief is pictured with a guardless coffin in his sash. It is interesting that he lived on the Red River within easy striking distance of Washington, Arkansas.

(I know that not every bowie collector will trust the curatorial judgment herein offered. Flayderman has no trouble linking the several “Black-related” knives, even if he’s not sure of their origin. In this category I would include the one he illustrated (446), Carrigan, Tunstall, Bowie No.1, two owned by Bill Wright, one in the Jack Royse collection, one in Joe Musso’s collection, and one recently acquired by the Historic Arkansas Museum from the Ducros family in Louisiana. Others might not even trust Flayderman on this. But every collector has performed analysis of objects. Especially if curious about an unsigned object – and even about a marked object – the collector compares materials, design, construction techniques, etc. and makes a decision. Savvy Kentucky rifle collectors have to do this regarding unmarked specimens. Art curators must make attributions from the way the subjects are rendered, the style of brush strokes, and such as clothing clues – sometimes a very difficult process. Knives are not as hard, and many knife collectors could make accurate attributions of English & Hubers, or Marks & Rees, or Schively, or more modern makers, even with the makers’ marks taped over. It’s not rocket science, but it does require, if not side-by-side comparison, at least careful and systematic observation. I can assert with confidence approaching certainty, that if asked to divide all of the known old guardless coffins into logical groupings related to material, design and construction, most sophisticated collectors would put the “Black-related” knives together (as have Flayderman and Batson), and grouped three Sheffield knives mentioned above, with all the rest (Crookes, Rose, Ames and a few unmarked) in a third miscellaneous category. Such characteristics as the nature of the handle material, the presence (or absence) of a real ricasso and of silver on the ricasso area, and the grind of the blade are particularly relevant. I hope that the curious will visit the Historic Arkansas Museum to see some of these knives.)

Additional supporting evidence to the Black story rests in a daguerreotype which descended in the Buzzard family of southwest Arkansas. The dag consists of two men holding weapons which include two guardless coffins, apparently identical to those attributed to Black. Buzzard family tradition holds that Black and Jacob Buzzard are pictured, but further analysis of the photographic plate suggests that the photo might have been taken in the early 1850s, making it unlikely that either James Black or Jacob Buzzard have been captured. But the photo still offers significant testimony. The Jones account

mentions the Buzzard family's connection to Black (but Jones makes no mention of the photograph), and this photo and the family information preserved with it from the Buzzard family support the Jones account. Before its transport to Little Rock, the photo had never been out of southwest Arkansas, according to the family. Flayderman tries to drape the picture with uncertainty, but it and the related information provided by a Buzzard descendant connect Buzzards and Black, reinforcing the Jones account, and the picture and information associate those distinctive looking knives to both Black and the Buzzards.

Buzzards, Black, guardless coffins, Tunstall knife, silvered ricasso in the Jones account, apprenticeship to a silver-plater, the Garland account, the Carrigan knife, Sheffield copies, all make a reasonable story.

Norm Flayderman has given a spirited critique of the James Black story. I have offered what I hope is a reasonable response to his concerns. I don't presume to have an air-tight argument, but the massing of information is significant. If we accept the possibility that Black made these knives, then a lot of things fit together. The mention of the Arkansas blacksmith in P.Q.'s letter; the 1841 *Telegraph* article; the gift of the knife to Garland in 1853; the Black obits; the basic outlines of the Pope, Jones and Garland accounts; the Buzzard daguerreotype; the Carrigan Knife; the Arkansas Toothpick, Arkansas knife, Sheffield connection; the Kellogg memoir, etc. If we decide that Black did not make the knives, then all of these become a strange unexplained coincidence combined with a conspiracy initiated by a crazy blind man and somehow promulgated by unsuspecting co-conspirators.

A wise collector once told me that the Black story "wouldn't hold up in a court of law." This person is well experienced in criminal justice, and his argument is pretty strong if the attribution had to do with a capital crime. But recently a judge informed me that in a civil case, the story could very well hold up. He quoted *Black's Law Dictionary* (7th ed. 1999) which notes that the burden of persuasion – that is, a party's duty to convince a fact-finder to view the facts in a manner favorable to that party – in civil cases is "by a preponderance of the evidence." That term is defined as follows: superior evidentiary weight that, though not sufficient to free the mind wholly from all reasonable doubt, is still sufficient to incline a fair and impartial mind to one side of the issue rather than the other. Such a process depends upon the authority of the sources, how well they fit together, and the plausibility of the overall story. To refute the accumulation of evidence, skepticism is not the only tool necessary. An alternative theory needs to be offered. This is also true for historians. It's easy to say "slavery was not the cause of the Civil War," for example, but the true historian who believes that will not only try to refute the slavery theory, but also try to support an alternative one, such as states rights. Regarding the Black argument, what is the alternative theory for the Carrigan knife, and what is the supporting evidence? What is the alternative theory for the Tunstall? What is the alternative theory on where these early guardless coffins came from, and what is the supporting evidence? What is the alternative theory on the origin of the silver-plated ricasso, and the evidence? A majority of the information in the *Telegraph* article, and much of the Jones and Garland accounts is substantiated from other sources. Why would only their narration on the bowie knife be suspect?

Another criticism of the Black story rests in the presence of much of its defense in the state of Arkansas. We who argue thusly are to be suspect because we want it to be true. Bill Williamson and others have questioned several reports on Black from this perspective. (Williamson had his own claim to an “original bowie knife” – the Edwin Forrest knife – and could also be challenged that he was prejudiced against other claims. Many folks in the collecting community have their own “axes – or knives – to grind.”) I can only say that any argument should be considered on its merit, no matter from where it comes. Believe it or not, the James Black controversy is not the most sensitive issue that the Historic Arkansas Museum has had to face over accuracy in the related historical record. We have had to change the names of two of our historic houses, an act much more radical locally than any argument over Black. We love footnotes. This might be why other knives associated by some with James Black have not been embraced by the museum. The fact is that thoughtful souls have looked at the assembled information on James Black and concluded it a powerful argument. Others might hesitate to yield to the argument for what could be called political reasons – they might accept the possibility of Black making guardless coffins but wouldn’t admit it because such authorities as Bill Williamson, Ben Palmer and Norm Flayderman didn’t or haven’t. (Here I might note that the late Bill Moran, close friend of Ben Palmer, told me that Ben was open-minded and would have likely changed his mind about Black given the accumulation of evidence that Moran saw in recent years.) Others will remain skeptical, because the Black story might challenge their own assessment of the early history of the bowie. Suffice it to say that I would be embarrassed for someone to find where I have taken liberties with the truth or speculated beyond the logical.

No one embarrassed me after the publication of “The Carrigan Knife: the Key to the James Black Mystery.” (To be honest, responding to my “Toothpick State” article, Bill Williamson took me to task for referencing Dickie Washer’s book. He preferred that folks not “legitimize” Mr. Washer in such a way.) The most effective criticism, which came from several letters to the editor of *Knife World*, related to the daguerreotype descended in the Buzzard family. There was never a question of it being a daguerreotype, but, as it turns out, it is unlikely that the dag pictures Black and Buzzard, given the probable date of the plate, as mentioned above. But it is still strong circumstantial evidence for the Black story, reinforcing evidence from other sources.

Among other theories raised regarding these guardless coffins – Bill Williamson and at least one other suggested that they might be from Ohio, witness Marks & Rees. But we’ve already seen a logical explanation of how Marks & Rees might have gotten the inspiration for their fine knives. In their first ad in the *Daily Gazette* (April 13, 1833), Marks & Rees touted their training in Philadelphia, but the only products they mentioned were surgical and dental instruments, trusses and plastering trowels – no weapons of any kind. I would assert that guardless coffins were on the market somewhere by that time, and Philadelphia produced some fine early bowies, but is not known for the guardless coffin. No evidence has come out of Cincinnati attributing anything as significant as the origin of these early prototypical coffin handled knives to Marks & Rees or any other local cutler. Wouldn’t someone have commented on the pioneering production of bowie knives as a local phenomenon within a decade or two (or three or four) after the fact?

Finally, there were, in the commentary on articles relating to James Black, opinions of well-known knife experts that Black made no such knives. But, without

some kind of documentation these skepticism-based assertions remain only opinions – certainly enough to satisfy those experts and colleagues for whom their word is sterling, but perhaps not adequate in the research-based marketplace of ideas.

So here's the latest of my 'Black made a bowie knife' articles. While I'm sure some folks will not be convinced, unless someone can offer more than simple skepticism, the Black explanation remains the most logical way to understand this part of the bowie's history. Black did not "invent" the bowie, and he did not make the Sandbar Duel "hunting knife," but evidence suggests he was an early and important maker of bowies whose work influenced other cutlers in America and Sheffield.