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Columnist

# Fleshing out Isaiah's saga

Several months ago, I wrote a piece about a slave who was buried near a country churchyard in the red clay hills of Fairfield County, a few feet beyond the fence of a white cemetery.

The slave had requested, on his deathbed, that he be buried as close as possible to his master. The reaction to that piece was more than I expected. And what it says to me is that a lot of readers are interested in the history of those days, days that seem so far from our minds today. They're rich in images that tell us a little about our past and about ourselves — who we are and where we come from.

But I felt frustrated after writing the piece. I couldn't add a scintilla more to the story. The slave, Isaiah Moore, had loved his master, and the epitaph on his simple stone marker read, "As Good As Ever Fluttered."

## Childhood memories

You can understand my joy, then, when a few weeks after the piece appeared, I received a letter from Thomas M. Patrick of Greenville. He had grown up in the community of Woodward, where the slave was buried, and had faint, childhood memories of those days.

"I was named after one of my ancestors, Thomas Moore," he wrote. "The Moores owned a good many slaves, and in her will, one of my great-great-aunts had left several slaves to the children of the Brice family. Isaiah was given to the future Major Thomas W. Brice."

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The two grew up hunting, fishing and playing together. Theirs was a bond of love, and it did not end until death separated them.

"During the War of Northern Aggression (not the Civil War, please), when the major lost his eye, the Confederate Army was in retreat. The major was so badly wounded, his compatriots had to leave him behind on the battlefield. He couldn't walk or ride his horse.

"When they got back to the campsite and told Isaiah about the major, he immediately learned from them where the major was lying. Then he took a horse and went in search of the major. When he found him, he put the major on top of the horse, then carried him to a safe place. He nursed the major back to health, and afterwards, the major fought in other battles."

## Not a sinful sport

Patrick offered, also, a plausible, if not apocryphal, explanation for Moore's epitaph. "Some people can't figure out the epitaph, 'As Good As Ever Fluttered,'" he wrote. "But I have been told on good authority that the major and Isaiah Moore did a lot of cock fighting where there's a lot of fluttering in the pit. It was not considered a sinful sport in those days, as long as your roosters won.

"Our home was across the highway from the cemetery and near Brice's old mercantile store. I was young then, as I was born in 1907, but I remember the major. I also remember Isaiah, and heard him play the fiddle (self-taught) many times. He also called for the square dance.

"He was quite a gentleman. I have a nephew, Dr. Barle R. Barton, a Presbyterian minister in Virginia, who likes to recount the story of Isaiah to his congregation. He tells them, 'In Heaven, there will not be any fences.'"

## A warm story

The story of Isaiah Moore warms my heart. I can only hope that the memory of who he was and what he was — and the things he did — will linger on.

It also reminds me, somewhat sadly, that if you want to find a lot of the history that's buried in South Carolina, you do not go out with a pick ax and bucket. Instead, you poke for it with pins. You pry and pray it out. You sweep it up like forgotten bits of lint from an old room.