

“For the Scrutiny of Science and the Light of Revelation”

American Blood Falls

by Tom Maxwell

Aor millennia, showers of blood, known variously as blood falls, rains of blood, and blood rain, have been reported in sources both historical and literary. The earliest record comes from Homer’s *Iliad*, in which Zeus makes it rain blood “as a portent of slaughter”: “Then, touch’d with grief, the weeping Heavens distill’d / A shower of blood o’er all the fatal field.” Pliny, Livy, and Plutarch mention actual rains of blood and flesh. Cicero recorded these events as well, but doubted their veracity. Cicero, an early proponent of the view that these rains had a natural explanation, was succeeded in the twelfth century by “the great grammarian and natural philosopher” William of Conches, who sought to explain blood falls as the result of the power of wind and the properties of condensed and heated rain.¹

The phenomenon continued to be reported throughout Medieval and Renaissance England, France, Germany, Ireland, and Iceland. Contemporary chroniclers seldom recorded detailed descriptions, and the consensus was that they were omens of suffering or terrible transition. When claims of blood falls came to the New World with European settlers, they were disseminated through a powerful new medium, the newspaper. The first known report of an American blood fall was in 1708:

By Letters from *Dorchester in South-Carolina of April 7th* last we are acquainted, that some of their Indian Traders met with some Indians who informed them that they were being Hunting about 6 or 700 Miles from *Dorchester* towards the *French* Settlement at Mobile . . . there fell a Shower of Blood, in which they walk’d up to the Ankles.²

While it is not possible either to prove or disprove these ancient and early era claims, the real benefit of examining them lies elsewhere. In his essay “Observations on Early Medieval Weather in General, Bloody Rain in Particular,” historian Paul Edward Dutton differentiates between climate and weather. Climate, he argues, exists without us. “Weather,” however, “is the atmosphere in contact with us, and exists when we engage it physically and think about it . . . To study

the weather is to study the human.”³ Blood falls, oddly enough, are wonderfully revealing of societal norms.

Blood and meat showers were seen through the competing lenses of superstition and rationality. The former gradually receded as the latter advanced in the nineteenth century, culminating in the best-documented case, which occurred in Chatham County, North Carolina, in 1884. Let us first go back some eight decades previously, when science was scarcely involved.

BLOOD FALLS AS PROPHECY

At the dawn of the nineteenth century, a newly formed religious group exhibited strange behavior. Known as “Schismatics,” because of their separation from the Presbyterian Church in 1803, they soon acquired another nickname: “The Jerks.” (Today they are known as Shakers.) During enormous camp meetings in Kentucky and Ohio, thousands would drop down, as if dead. Others clapped, leaped around, screamed, and engaged in “exercises which were believed to have been of an involuntary kind.”

In the rolling exercise, as it was called, they appeared to be forcibly thrown down, and to roll over and over like a log, or in a kind of double posture to turn like a wheel. Sometimes they went in this manner through mud and dirt, which was considered very degrading. In the jirking exercise the head appeared to be violently moved towards one shoulder, then the other, and backwards and forwards. Here it may be observed, that during the time they were under these operations, though they were often exposed to imminent danger, yet few received any hurt . . . The jirking exercise was sometimes accompanied, and often succeeded the barking. In this exercise both men and women personated and took the position of a dog, moved about in a horizontal posture upon their hands and feet, growled, snapped their teeth, and barked as if they were affected with the hydrophobia.⁴

As with most radical sects, the Jerks looked for a divine imprimatur and put special store by the prophecy of Joel: “And ye shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the Lord your God, and none else: and my people shall never be ashamed. And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions . . . And I will shew wonders in the heavens and in the earth, blood, and fire, and pillars of smoke.” In the summer of 1804, near the Turtle Creek Meeting House outside of Lebanon, Ohio, there fell “an extraordinary shower of blood.” This and other signs comprised “the perfect accomplishment” of Joel’s prophecy, according to church leader Richard McNemar. Two decades later, a similar interpretation would lead to slaughter.⁵



Showers of blood have been reported for millennia. Pliny, Livy, and Plutarch mentioned rains of blood and flesh. Cicero recorded these events as well, but doubted their veracity. Zeus makes it rain blood, “as a portent of slaughter,” in Homer’s Iliad. Relief of Zeus, Roman copy from the 2nd century CE after a Greek original from the 5th century BCE, from the Ludovisi Collection.

In 1825, a young slave named Nat Turner saw lights in the sky. To him, they appeared to be “the lights of the Savior’s hands, stretched forth from east to west.” As he described in his *Confessions*,

And I wondered greatly at these miracles, and prayed to be informed of a certainty of the meaning thereof; and shortly afterwards, while labouring in the field, I discovered drops of blood on the corn, as though it were dew from heaven—and I communicated it to many, both white and black, in the neighbourhood—and I then found on the leaves in the woods hieroglyphic characters and numbers, with the forms of men in different attitudes, portrayed in blood, and representing the figures I had seen before in the heavens. And now the Holy Ghost had revealed itself to me, and made plain the miracles it had shown me; for as the blood of Christ had been shed on this earth, and had ascended to heaven for the salvation of sinners, and was now returning to earth again in the form of dew—and as the leaves on the trees bore the impression of the figures I had seen in the heavens—it was plain to me that the Saviour was about to lay down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and the great day of judgment was at hand.⁶

It was, at least for Southampton County, Virginia. On Sunday, August 21, 1831, and for the next forty-eight hours, Turner and a group of fellow slaves massacred at least fifty-five white men, women, and children. The band, armed with guns, axes, scythes, and clubs, was eventually scattered. Turner managed to hide “under a pile of fence posts” and in a cave for six weeks before capture. Prior to his inevitable execution, his “confession” was taken by his lawyer, Thomas R. Gray, and

used as evidence against him. Gray published the account the following year. The authenticity of this document, as Turner's true voice, is a thicket that cannot be negotiated here. Turner saw lights in the sky and a solar eclipse. His interpretation of the meaning of those events, obviously, was entirely his own. What he claimed to have seen on the corn and leaves was the aftermath of a blood fall. Not even whites disputed the claim: In 1859, after John Brown's failed attack on Harper's Ferry, a pseudonymous letter appeared in a Charleston paper. "*Nat Turner* made his followers in Virginia believe that the vengeance of God was about to fall upon the white men, because it had about that time rained blood, and it was a powerful instrument in his hands."⁷

"What we have so long predicted, — at the peril of being stigmatized as an alarmist and declaimer, — has commenced its fulfillment," wrote abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, prior to Turner's capture. Extending the physical slaughter to metaphor of a blood rain, Garrison warned of the trouble to come: "The first drops of blood, which are but the prelude to a deluge from the gathering clouds, have fallen." For Turner and the Jerks, blood from the sky was simply confirmation, a self-fulfilling prophecy. No explanation was needed. Not everyone, however, interpreted such events as divine. "When we read in Pliny of a shower of blood," wrote a religious essayist in 1830, "the sound critic smiles at the simplicity of the times; because, according to the laws of nature, this phenomenon could not have really existed. But we cannot say the same of miracles."⁸

The next American blood fall may not have been miraculous, but its description was biblical. On September 8, 1841, a rain of blood was reported near Amesbury, Massachusetts. No witnesses were named in the newspaper account:

There had been a drizzling rain during a great part of the day, until about 4 o'clock in the afternoon, when the rain stopped and the dark clouds began gradually to assume a brassy hue, until the whole heavens above seemed a sea of fire. The sky continued to grow more bright until about a quarter past five, when almost instantly it became of burnished red, and in a few moments it rained moderately, a thick liquid of the appearance of blood, clothing fields and roads for two mile in circumference in a blood-stained garment. The bloody rain continued for about ten minutes, when it suddenly cleared away, and the atmosphere became so intensely cold that overcoats were needed.⁹

In February 1844, blood and meat "the size of a dime to a 25 cent piece" fell on Jersey City, New Jersey. "The Millerites were particularly interested in the matter," said the newspaper article, "and contended that it was one of the *very last* "Signs of the Times," urging all to look for the immediate dissolution of old mother Earth; several venerable ladies took the hint, and made instantaneous preparation for going off." Despite numerous end-of-the-world predictions for the first half of the nineteenth century, the world refused to end for Henry Miller or his followers.¹⁰

The author of the Amesbury article claimed to have seen a sample of the liquid that fell and compared it to clotted blood. "It must be a similar liquid, from account," he concluded, "to that which recently fell in Tennessee," a reference to a recent "meat shower" near Nashville. As strange as rains of blood or blood-like material were, reports of rains accompanied by what seemed to be animal tissue and fat outnumber blood falls.¹¹

The Tennessee event was extraordinary. What appeared to be blood and pieces of meat, some almost two inches long, rained on a tobacco field near Lebanon, Tennessee. The fall was witnessed by slaves and investigated by University of Nashville professor Gerard Troost, who conducted tests on samples sent to him by a local doctor. "There is no doubt," he concluded, "but that this substance is animal matter and belongs to our globe." The *Boston Post* reported that some people "construed the mysterious shower into a judgment from Heaven, designed to warn the slave-holding states of the iniquity of their traffic in flesh and blood." The Tennessee event was widely covered in the national press. The Amesbury blood fall story was picked up by a few papers but went nowhere. As a description of a real event, there was little information to rely upon. As an answer to the Bostonians' theory of divine judgment of slaveholders, however, it would have provided a timely rebuttal. Despite the findings of Professor Troost, the Tennessee event was ultimately dismissed, without a shred of evidence, as a hoax perpetrated by the slaves.¹²

Two meat showers in 1850 underscored the coming national conflagration. On February 15, it rained "flesh, liver, lights, brains and blood" from a small red cloud on Thomas M. Clarkson's farm southwest of Clinton in Sampson County, North Carolina. As the Clarkson children ran for cover, they were quoted by the local paper as exclaiming, "Mother, there is meat falling!" The fall covered an area fifty feet wide by several hundred yards in length. Six months later, on August 20, "[s]lightly tainted" meat, "the size of a pigeon's egg to that of an orange" rained down on Benicia Barracks outside of San Francisco. Brevet Major Robert Allen was hit by a piece. This fall was almost as large as the one in Tennessee: three hundred by eighty yards. The sky was cloudless. Both Clarkson and Allen would go on to serve during the Civil War, on opposing sides.¹³

There appear to be no reports of blood or meat showers during the Civil War, when the phenomenon existed as metaphor. One article about a Confederate Convention worried that it was "a forerunner of that dreadful storm which we fear is already breaking over our heads, and unless arrested . . . will drench the whole North in a shower of blood." The ground of Malvern Hill was said by a newspaper to be "crimsoned by the red rain of blood" after the battle, as was Gaines's Hill, captured in a contemporary poem by Amanda T. Jones, in which the "gallant



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Pennsylvania Reserves” “Planted our guns by vale and wood, / To wait the rain of blood.” After the war, reports of physical blood rains resumed.¹⁴

Blood showered on J. Baldwin’s house in Tulare County, California, on July 15, 1870. The newspaper account is short on details, in contrast to an awful experience that October in Texas. Tennessee-born physician C. J. Sullivan related the event to the *Sulphur Springs Gazette*:

On last Sunday, the 2d inst., about 3 o’clock in the morning, some six miles south of Sulphur Springs, when no cloud was to be seen to dim the blue vault of heaven, fell what can but be termed a rain or shower of blood, which lasted some eight or ten seconds. Its district was quite limited, and it fell in specks about the size of squirrel shot, and in density about one hundred to the size of an ordinary plate. This shower was witnessed by Mr. Bussy and his family, who were seated around the breakfast table in the yard, at the time above stated, when, upon a sudden, came pattering the drops of blood upon the dishes, victuals, and all around. Mr. Bussy immediately sent his little son for me, whose clothes were bespattered with blood on reaching my house. An hour elapsed, probably, before reaching the vicinity, yet the leaves, grass, and the table bore the distinctly visible marks of blood.¹⁵

“I leave the matter,” Sullivan concluded, “for the scrutiny of science and the light of revelation.” Unfortunately, neither was in attendance. There were no further reports or inquiries into the Texas event.¹⁶

Similarly, there is little to add to “the strange scene witnessed on a farm in Virginia” on January 19, 1881, beyond one newspaper article:

Mr. James M. Quillen arrived here to-day from Nickelsville, and makes a statement, corroborated by the Mayor and other prominent citizens of that place, in which he affirms that yesterday, about midday, a strange cloud was seen hovering over a half acre field on the farm of Dr. Abram Saylor, in the lower end of Russell. A few minutes after a red shower began to fall, and covered the ground and clothes of those who stood beneath with a red substance, which could not be told from blood. Mr. Quillen’s shirt front and hat were covered with what appeared to be blood-stains. The shower lasted about a minute, and the red mass came down in a slow and fine drizzle. The cloud then rolled off gradually. The singular part of the occurrence is that save in this one place the sky was clear. The phenomenon causes intense excitement among the colored and ignorant white people, many affirming the approach of the end of the world.¹⁷

By this time, it had consistently rained blood on the United States for almost a century. Fourteen of the twenty-four reported events occurred in the South, where the monstrous showers fell on women and children, black and white, Union and Confederate. As we have seen, reports of the events themselves were largely consistent. In the early decades of the century, superstitious and religious folk gave meaning to the phenomenon. As the decades progressed, men of science attempted to provide a rational explanation. The Tennessee meat shower (and a subsequent event in Kentucky in 1876) became media circuses, and the scientists who got involved were made objects of ridicule. “It was necessary to ‘investigate,’” observed one editorial about the Tennessee event, “and the savans set themselves about it accordingly in various parts of the country . . . It has turned out, however . . . that there was a most wasteful and unnecessary expenditure of philosophy on the occasion.” After this, the rains rolled on, but science largely stopped investigating. When it rained blood in North Carolina towards the end of the century, the results were a microcosm of the entire American spectacle. At its most basic, the general reaction to these disruptive events had been to reinforce the social norm. At least once, however, on a farm in Chatham County, the red rain dissolved these boundaries.¹⁸

THE CHATHAM BLOOD FALL

Bass Lasater was about twenty-five years old on February 25, 1884. She and her husband Cite sharecropped on Silas Beckwith’s farm in the New Hope Township

of Chatham County, North Carolina. About two o'clock that Monday afternoon, she stood outside of her modest cabin on newly ploughed earth. Small pine bushes lined the fence on the far side of the field. It was a sunny day with a slight southerly breeze. Shocks of yellow forsythia likely punctuated the border scrub. Something red splashed on the ground in front of her, and the pattering increased as it rained what appeared to be blood for over a minute. Lasater looked up, but there was not a cloud in the sky. Drops, pea-sized to finger-length, spattered the furrows, fence, and bushes. The shower covered a roughly rectangular area, fifty by seventy feet, with blood in every square foot. The large drops on the fence and bushes coagulated. Soil absorbed the smaller ones.¹⁹

Word got out, and neighbors arrived the next day. One traced the length of the shower and examined the sticky drops. Bloody soil was "gathered in handfuls" by others. A local doctor prepared samples and after "certain simple tests" — apparently the sniff test — concluded it was fresh blood. Another unknown person collected samples of bloody sand and gave some to the neighbor and another local doctor, Sidney Atwater. A week later, Atwater took his sample to the University of North Carolina for analysis. Assuming it was a hoax, no one in the chemistry department looked at it. The *Chatham Record* reported the event but was skeptical: "We do not ask our readers to believe the following wonderful statement," the article began, "but merely publish it as it is told us." And that, seemingly, was the end of the story.²⁰

Three weeks later, at the University of North Carolina, Dr. Atwater's sample was finally examined. "When it was taken up several days afterwards," wrote chemistry professor Frank Venable, "there seemed to be sufficient interest attaching to it to warrant paying a visit to the locality where the matter fell." Twenty-seven-year-old Francis Preston Venable was a promising scientist and teacher, with an established pedigree. His ancestors had lived in Virginia "continuously" since 1685. His great-great-grandfather was a founder of Hampden-Sydney College. His grandfather served as an officer under Harry "Light Horse" Lee during the Revolutionary War, and his father was an aid to Lee's son, Robert E. Lee, from 1862 to 1865. By 1884, Frank Venable had been a professor of chemistry at UNC for three years, with some time taken off for further study at the University of Göttingen, where he graduated magna cum laude.²¹

Three weeks after Bass Lasater witnessed blood rain around her, Venable made his way south to her "small negro cabin" and conducted an investigation. His notes of the interview no longer exist, but here is the heart of our story. One day in April 1884, a man with every social and political advantage met his shadow: a sharecropping black woman. Venable described Lasater as "a good deal frightened and affected, taking [the event] as a portent of death or evil of some kind."²²

The political tumult following the Civil War had, unsurprisingly, victimized North Carolina's African Americans. In 1876, there was a reported meat shower



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near Gastonia. “There have been negroes enough killed there, during the Democratic campaign,” observed the *Cincinnati Times*, “to supply a shower of Noachian proportions.” When it rained blood in Chatham, the nightmares of Jim Crow, the Wilmington “riot,” and the cult of the Lost Cause waited in the wings.²³

That Venable even bothered talking to Lasater was unprecedented. His predecessor, Gerard Troost, who investigated the Tennessee incident thirty-three years before, did not include African American witnesses in his interviews. During his visit, Venable also called on the neighbors, including S. A. Holleman, who provided a description of the scene. Although several heavy showers had fallen in the interim, Venable still saw bloody stains on the fence rails. He returned to Chapel Hill and prepared a report.²⁴

The Elisha Mitchell Scientific Society, which Venable had helped found the previous year, held a meeting on Saturday, April 14. Following a talk by another professor on the rotation of the earth, Venable gave a presentation on the Chatham blood fall. A reporter took notes:

People had carried most of the “blood” off before he could get there. Specimens were sent him by some intelligent men who had gathered them up . . .

Interviewed the woman who witnessed it. The sky was clear—nothing unusual noticed. The blood fell in a shower during a minute or two and over a small area. None fell on the woman.²⁵

Later that night, Venable gave a lecture titled “The Spectroscope and Its Achievements,” illustrated with a magic lantern. The spectroscope helped Venable establish that the sample he examined was “partially decomposed blood.” In a letter written to the *News and Observer* the same day as his lecture, he described his analysis in detail: “This leaves little or no reasonable doubt then,” he concluded, “that the samples examined had blood upon them.” (Venable was reasonably sure of this, but not entirely: “The test known as haemin crystals,” he noted in his report, “could only be gotten indistinctly, if at all.”) He went on to offer:

The question arises were they carefully taken; had no animal ever bled on the same ground; had pigs never been slaughtered in that quarter of the field, etc. As to theories accounting for so singular a material falling from a cloudless sky, I have no plausible ones to offer. It may have been some bird of prey passing over, carrying a bleeding animal, but a good deal of blood must have fallen to cover so large a space. The subject is quite a puzzle and offers a tempting field for the theorist blessed with a vivid imagination.²⁶

Venable also published a report in the Mitchell Society’s journal. “It is a pity,” he wrote, “that a sample could not have been gotten more directly—one whose origin would have been placed beyond all dispute.” Still, the evidence of his investigation was perplexing.

If a hoax has been perpetrated on the people of that neighborhood it has certainly been very cleverly done and an object seems lacking. On the possibility that it is not a joke, I have deemed this strange matter worthy of being placed on record. Other similar observations hereafter may corroborate it and combined observations may give rise to the proper explanation.²⁷

It is not surprising that Venable found blood. Even if the event were a hoax, someone would have had the presence of mind to splash real blood on the Chatham sand. What he refused to do, correctly, was speak about anything other than his laboratory work and answer the question on everybody’s mind: how could this happen?

On May 8, a pseudonymous letter appeared in the *News and Observer*: “Read Figuier’s ‘Insect World,’ page 187,” it read cryptically, “and you will find a solution of ‘The Shower of Blood,’ mentioned in your paper.” The solution, it seemed, involved butterflies. In an attempt to explain the Tennessee meat shower forty-three years before, Benjamin Hallowell, principal and founder of the Alexandria Boarding School, wrote the *National Intelligencer*. He referenced “celebrated philosopher”



When UNC chemistry professor (and future UNC president) Frank Venable interviewed Bass Lasater, it was unprecedented. Investigations of a Tennessee incident thirty-three years before did not include African American witnesses. During Venable's visit, though, he even called on the neighbors and saw for himself bloody stains still on the fence rails; yet his wish that "combined observations might give rise to the proper explanation" has never come to pass. Frank Venable, courtesy of the North Carolina Collection, Wilson Library, at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc, who explained a reported rain of blood near Aix in 1608 as the reddish fluid discharged by butterflies when emerging from the chrysalis state. This could not explain the thumb-sized pieces of meat and fat found by Tennessee witnesses. "The instance of the Nashville account, of flesh appearing with the blood," Hollowell offered, "no doubt was the result of the insect having perished in the process of transformation."²⁸

North Carolinians, like many Americans, were terrified by the Tennessee event. "The so-called shower of flesh and blood in Lebanon, Tennessee, in 1841 caused considerable fright in North Carolina," wrote historian Guion Griffis Johnson, and that fear "was not allayed by so simple an explanation." Still, the insect hypothesis never quite disappeared. A "popular guide" to butterflies, published in 1898, contains three whole pages on the history of "red rains." Professor Troost also made an attempt at explanation—the real reason he was called in—and conjectured about a dead pig, a whirlwind, and an "electric cloud." No matter: the Tennessee event was ultimately dismissed—without a shred of proof—as a hoax, perpetrated by the slaves.²⁹

The Tennessee fall covered some five acres, but proponents of the butterfly explanation demurred at estimating the number of insects required. Presumably, it would have taken a cloud of them even to spatter the "fifty by seventy feet" of the Chatham fall. Bass Lasater looked up during the shower and saw nothing—surely a sky full of butterflies would have been noteworthy on its own. In fact, it was: *The Chatham Record* wrote of "an immense swarm of butterflies" in 1887:

The swarm was moving southward and it took half an hour for it to pass. A look either north, south, east, or west, showed millions upon millions of the insects fluttering and evidently trying to escape from something. The lowest were about 20 feet from the ground, and they could be seen as high as the eye could reach . . . This is something never before recorded in this State.³⁰

There was no consequent report of a shower of blood.

AN INCONCLUSIVE CONCLUSION

The explanations offered for the century of American rains of blood and flesh were as numerous as the reports and considerably more varied: tornadoes, the judgment of Heaven, Bactrian spawn, vomiting buzzards, emergent butterflies, excreting moths, hoaxes, sand and diatoms. They were event-specific, designed only to make the strangeness go away. As a result, the stage was cleared for the next act, which was invariably a repeat performance. No one explanation was ever fully accepted.

At the time, and certainly at this remove, it is impossible to say what happened. Even if we had been seated around the Bussy family table in Sulphur Springs, Texas, in 1870, or standing next to the unfortunate Major Allen at Benicia Barracks in 1850, our stories would be unbelievable, maybe even to ourselves. Perhaps it is enough to use the red rains as an access to the American spectacle of that time—race relations, contemporary scientific and journalistic standards, political and social upheaval, and a kind of mental preparedness. Somehow, through some combination of historic literature, a dim understanding of climatology, or Homeric memory, people of every race and educational background entertained the possibility that blood *could* rain down on their heads. We have come full circle and return to meaning through metaphor, which sufficed for the Jerks, Nat Turner, and William Lloyd Garrison. The meaning of, if not the explanation for, rains of blood was right under everyone's nose.

The Chatham fall occurred near Cyprett's Bridge on New Hope Creek, the center of the proposed location for the University of North Carolina in 1792. Former UNC president Kemp Plummer Battle wrote about this part of the state's history:

The Board proceeded to ballot and Cyprett's or Cipritz's Bridge, now Prince's Bridge, on the great road from New Bern by Raleigh to Pittsboro, was chosen. The fifteen miles radius allowed a range over wide areas of Chatham, Wake and Orange; from the highlands of New Hope to the hills of Buckhorn; from the Hickory Mountain to the eminence overlooking our beautiful capital on the west. The same influences which secured that the capital should be located within ten miles of Isaac Hunter's plantation, in Wake County, that is, as near the centre of the State as possible, carried this vote . . .³¹

An article in the *Raleigh Register* noted the event's proximity to Cyprett's Bridge and concluded: "Inasmuch as the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church, there may be, as President Battle suggested, some mysterious connection still between the wise founders of the University and its learned professor."³²

Frank Venable married in November 1884 and had five children. In 1900 he would be elected president of the University of North Carolina. An enthusiastic gardener, devout Presbyterian, and honored in the fields of education and research, he died in 1934. His work on the Chatham blood fall is largely forgotten, and his wish that "combined observations might give rise to the proper explanation" has never come to pass. He was clearly unaware of precedent. Bass Lasater was condemned to obscurity. She and Cite had three children by 1880, according to the census: Enoch, Vinnerah, and Quinetta. None of their names appear in the Chatham County cemetery index. Silas Beckwith's farm, the scene of the fall, is now under Jordan Lake, near Bell's Point. Cyprett's Bridge is gone and forgotten. There would be three more reports of such rains in America after the Chatham event, and then the phenomenon ceased altogether after 1898. A similar rain in Sicily in 1901 was blamed on Saharan sand.³³

Professor Battle's mention of the "mysterious connection" between the University's founders and Frank Venable was more deeply resonant than he might have realized. "Blood is the flower and bloom of life," continues the etymological article from the *Marshfield Times* in 1892.

From "blood" we have bloedsian, bledsian and bletsian—all Anglo-Saxon—and bletsian has in Middle English been softened down into blessen or bless. So that to "bless" originally meant to consecrate by blood . . . In nearly all creeds of antiquity a blood rite was used to make a life bond between man and man, and man and God. In the covenant sacrifice of Exodus, Moses sprinkled half of the blood on the altar; the rest he sprinkled on the people. The fundamental idea of sacrifice and blood sprinkling was not . . . that of a sacred tribute, but of a communion between the god and his worshippers. Similarly among other early nations and among savage peoples of our own day, the blood rite possessed and possesses a mysterious force.³⁴

Perhaps this was the connection between Frank Venable and the University's founders, as Professor Battle suggested. From a social and cultural viewpoint, things played out as they were fated: Bass Lasater, the socially vulnerable, superstitious holdover from the beginning of that terrible century, decreased, while Frank Venable, the educated, rational materialist, increased. They were unknowing participants in the fleeting overlap of two worldviews who met by a small cabin in Chatham County, trying to understand the ineffable. As with those caught up in previous blood falls, their fears, explanations, strategies, and metaphors were fragments of a larger experience, made whole by the mysterious force of a strange,

and strangely common, event. Their blessing was that they were made at least dimly aware of this “life bond, between man and man.” Even by 1884, the only thing that would bring two such disparate people as Bass Lasater and Frank Venable together was blood, falling from a clear blue sky.

NOTES

1. The line from Homer’s *Iliad* from *The Poetical Works of Alexander Pope*, ed. Rev. H. F. Cary, A.M. (London: George Rutledge and Sons, 1883), 304; John S. P. Tatlock, “Some Medieval Cases of Blood-Rain,” *Classical Philology* 9 (1914): 442–7; Paul Edward Dutton, “Observations on Early Medieval Weather in General, Bloody Rain in Particular,” in *The Long Morning of Medieval Europe: New Directions in Early Medieval Studies*, ed. Jennifer R. Davies and Michael McCormick (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1988), 163–180.

2. Dutton, “Observations on Early Medieval Weather in General, Bloody Rain in Particular,” 163–180; “By Letters from Dorchester in South-Carolina of April 7th Last,” *The Boston News-Letter*, May 24–31, 1708.

3. “Observations on Early Medieval Weather in General, Bloody Rain in Particular,” by Paul Edward Dutton, *The Long Morning of Medieval Europe: New Directions in Early Medieval Studies* by Jennifer R. Davies and Michael McCormick, pp. 163–180

4. Peter Cartwright, “The Great Revival,” in *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright: The Backwoods Preacher*, ed. W. P. Strickland (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1857), 45–55; “The History of the ‘Jirks,’ and other strange exercises which affected the subjects of the great Kentucky Revival, including an account of the first settlement of the Shakers in that country,” *The Telescope*, February 18, 1826, 150.

5. Joel 2:27–30 (King James); Richard McNemar, *The Kentucky Revival, or a Short History of the Late Extraordinary Out-Pouring of the Spirit of God, in the Western States of America* (Albany, NY: E. and E. Hosford, 1808), 68.

6. Thomas R. Gray, *The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton County, VA* (Baltimore, MD: Published by Thomas R. Gray; Lucas & Deaver, print., 1831), <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/turner/turner.html>.

7. “For the *Mercury*, Mr. Editor,” *Charleston Mercury*, November 11, 1859.

8. William Lloyd Garrison, “The Insurrection,” *The Liberator*, September 3, 1831; “On Miracles, Essay III,” *The Metropolitan* 1, nos. 1–12 (January–December 1830): 107.

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