

The Wagner Family: Pioneer Life on the Miami River

By Margot Ammidown*

The oldest known house standing in Miami today dates from the mid-1850s. It was built by William Wagner, a discharged Mexican War veteran who followed his former army troop to South Florida at the end of the Seminole Wars. The house was located near what is now N.W. 11th Street and 7th Avenue. William Wagner remained in Miami until his death in 1901. Many of Wagner's descendants still live in the area including a grandson, Charles Richards who was born on his grandfather's homestead in 1887, almost a decade before the incorporation of the city of Miami or the arrival of the railroad. Listening to Mr. Richards' stories of his family and their pioneer experiences from the porch of his sixty-year-old house, one door removed from the I-95 expressway overpass, one is struck by the spectrum of change in his lifetime.

The drama and suddenness of Miami's evolution is still unknown to most of its transient population. That is one reason why Dade Heritage Trust, a private non-profit group, felt the preservation and restoration of the Wagner house was so important. The structure is also a rare example of the vernacular wood frame architecture of South Florida's pioneer era. Unfortunately the Wagner house in its original location stood directly in the path of Dade County's new Metrorail mass transit system. Its preservation in the Highland Park subdivision that was the Wagner homestead was an accepted impossibility. The owner arranged to donate the house to Dade Heritage Trust which with the cooperation and assistance of the City of Miami, relocated the building in nearby Lummus Park. Its restoration and partial reconstruction is now underway.

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In 1979, DHT commissioned a research report and interpretive study of the Wagner house. Arva Parks had previously done research in the National Archives, discovering both Wagner's military record and homesteading papers. The following account of the Wagners and their life in Miami is excerpted from the report commissioned by Dade Heritage Trust.

Throughout the pioneer era until the State's Everglades drainage program was begun early in the twentieth century, the inhabitants of the southeast coast of Florida lived on what was essentially a rocky limestone ridge stretching two to ten miles in width between the bay and the Everglades. Except for the lush hardwood hammocks, the terrain gave the impression of being extremely barren. Beneath the scattered pine trees the land in most places was covered with a sparse sandy soil that frequently revealed the porous rock which supported it. This soil, however, proved able to sustain a variety of fruit trees quite well.

In several places along the southeast coast, the ridge was broken by rivers leading from the swamp to Biscayne Bay. The Miami River was one. Whereas the poorly shaded pineland seemed harsh and desolate, the crystalline rivers and bordering hammocks were cool, rich, and fertile. The banks of the Miami River rose to an elevation of two to three feet above sea level at the mouth, to as much as twelve feet in other places. The waters of the Everglades fell into the river over a rocky passageway that was from fifteen to twenty yards across and up to one hundred fifty yards in length. This area constituted the rapids of the Miami River, although they were not very turbulent and scarcely a foot deep.

Despite the equable climate, there were problems for those attempting to establish a life in Miami in the mid-1800s. The threat of Indian attack was the uppermost concern, and there was still a great deal of criticism by many settlers of the government's failure to completely exterminate the Indian population. The fear of Indian harassment resulted in the reopening of Fort Dallas in 1855, but previous to that occupation there was quite a bit of settlement activity on the Miami River.

In 1850, there were ninety-six people residing in Dade County, in addition to three officers, one doctor, and forty-seven enlisted men who temporarily occupied the fort in that year.¹ The vast majority of the civilians were young men seeking their fortunes. The professions listed in the census that year included two carpenters, a merchant, a large number of mariners, the Cape Florida Lighthouse keeper (Reason Duke), his assistant (John Christian), a clerk, a manufacturer, and many laborers.

Manufacturers and laborers were more often than not involved in the production of coontie starch. It was one of the few means by which South Florida pioneers could earn cash money, a scarce commodity in those days. There are records of Florida coontie being sold in northern markets as early as 1835.²

The profession most commonly named in the 1850 census was that of mariner. "Mariner" in most cases was an oblique term that could be equated with the less respectable title of "wrecker." The business of salvaging loot from lost ships was still an attraction even though the number of wrecks on the Florida reefs had begun to decrease by the mid-nineteenth century due to improved charts, new lighthouses, and the advent of steam powered vessels that were easier to maneuver. In spite of this the number of licensed wreckers continued to increase, but for most pioneers in the Miami area, wrecking was an adventurous supplement to the living provided by the land.

The period between the Second Seminole War and the beginning of the Civil War was a relatively peaceful one for Dade County. During the brief interlude of activity brought about by the final reopening of Fort Dallas in 1855, there was a great deal of fraternizing between the soldiers and the local folk. Several of the officers brought their families, and the population of Miami was considerably swelled during this time. The occupation of the fort caused a temporary economic boom considering there were three stores operating on the river; George Ferguson's, Dr. William Fletcher's, and a sutler's store at Fort Dallas run by Captain Sinclair and William Wagner. By the time the fort was preparing to close in 1858, there was also some friendly communication between Indians and settlers.

Over the decade of the 1850s the population expanded so that by 1860³ the river banks supported a friendly little community of settlers. Dr. Fletcher lived with his family on ten acres on the south bank of the Miami River. Moving west, up-river, George Ferguson who ran a large mill, sold his place to George Lewis. Across the river from Lewis on a small tributary that came to be known as Wagner Creek, lived the Wagner family. Near the Wagners on the creek was a bachelor named Michael Oxar, and further up the Miami River were two brothers, John and Nicholas Adams. Beyond their place was George Marshall, and Marshall's neighbor to the west was Theodore Bissell, a gentleman who lived on the river when he was not in Tallahassee as a representative from Dade County (1858, 1859, and 1860). There were substantial numbers of people passing through the Miami area in those days before the Civil War,

seamen, laborers, squatters, but the preceding were the ones who remained for some length of time and helped to start a pioneer settlement on the land that in the not too distant future would become the city of Miami. The Wagners were important figures in that pioneer community, partially because they were involved in many formative events, but mostly as symbols of a spirit and character that settled the South Florida frontier.

William Wagner according to his grandson, Charles Richards, was born on an immigrant ship in the Hudson River. The year was approximately 1825.⁴ The circumstances of his birth might serve to explain the inconsistency of the U.S. census records which alternately declare his birthplace to be New York or Baden, Germany. Baden was, no doubt, the home of William's parents before coming to America.

By the early eighteen hundreds there was already a sizable population of German immigrants living in New York. Many German families began a migration further west establishing settlements in Missouri and Indiana. Others put down stakes in Pennsylvania, forming the Pennsylvania Dutch/German communities. Although little is known of William Wagner's childhood there is some indication he might have grown up in Pennsylvania.⁵ The 1830 Pennsylvania census index lists over 100 Wagner families, however.

The earliest known official documentation of William Wagner's existence is his military record. Wagner enlisted as a volunteer in the United States Army on May 18, 1846⁶ in New York City at the outbreak of the Mexican War. He was twenty or twenty-one years old and unmarried. President Polk had recently issued a call for volunteers, but whether Wagner joined up out of national allegiance, strong political beliefs or the restless desire of a young man to see something of the world, is unknown. The latter reason is the more probable. The Mexican War was a territorial war begun on the pretense of Mexican border aggression, but even at the time the legitimacy of that claim was called into serious question. Neither was the volunteer army known for its dedication to the cause. Then Lieutenant George B. McClellan noted that, "The Mexican people are very polite to the regulars...but they hate the volunteers as they do old scratch himself...The volunteers carry on in a most shameful and disgraceful manner; they think nothing of robbing and killing Mexicans."⁷ They also gained a reputation for their lawlessness within the camps by both disregarding orders and firing their weapons at will. There is no indication in Wagner's later life of the reckless, lawless character of these "disgraceful volunteers," but he enlisted in the com-

pany of a rough bunch of young men, mostly from poor backgrounds who probably saw military service as an escape from an unappealing future at home.

William Wagner entered the army as a private and was sent to Governor's Island, New York for training. He was assigned to Company I, of the 2nd Regiment, U.S. Artillery, which was then commanded by a Captain Cotton.⁸ After training, Wagner was reportedly sent to the Rio Grande. He followed General Winfield Scott on his march to Mexico City via Vera Cruz, Chapultepec and Cerro Gordo, where decisive battles were fought. In later years when he was relating stories of his war experiences, Wagner told of marching through one particular city in Mexico where hostile inhabitants threw boiling water down on the American troops in the streets below their windows.⁹ The existing evidence suggests that Wagner did not complete the victorious march into Mexico City. He was wounded in the left leg at Cerro Gordo late in 1847 and was probably sent to Fort Moultrie on Sullivan's Island near Charleston, South Carolina, to recuperate. Wagner was quite obviously there by January of 1849 because at that time he married Eveline Aimar.¹⁰

Mrs. Wagner remains something of a mystery. According to census records, Eveline was born in South Carolina, her mother in the West Indies and her father in England. Charles Pierce, a later acquaintance of the family in Florida wrote that Mrs. Wagner was French creole.¹¹ "Creole" is a term that was originally used in the sixteenth century to denote persons born in the West Indies of Spanish parents to distinguish them from immigrants direct from Spain. However, over the years Creoles came to include people of a much wider range of ethnic backgrounds. French and Spanish colonialists intermarried with both Indians and blacks on the islands and their offspring were also known as Creoles. In the United States Creoles are mostly associated with Louisiana, but Charleston, too, had a small Creole population. There was an influx into Charleston of free men and women of mixed ancestry from the West Indies beginning in 1790. They were fleeing a slave revolt on the island of Saint Domingue, a former French colony, now Haiti. It is possible that Eveline Wagner was at least maternally descended from this line of immigrants.

Considering Mrs. Wagner's ancestry, her marriage would have been very controversial if not illegal. The so called Negro Laws of South Carolina determined that anyone who was 1/32 negro blood would be classified as black and therefore subject to further restrictions under the law. Inter-racial marriages were among the many activities restricted.

William Wagner and Eveline Aimar are not listed in the register of marriages taking place in South Carolina prior to the Civil War,¹² however, it may have been possible for them to marry at Fort Moultrie which they later claimed was the case. Apparently the legality of their marriage was called into question by suspicious and prying neighbors in Dade County in 1869 when they were required to file an affidavit proving that they were married.¹³ As the Wagners are not known to have remarried here, they must have married in South Carolina.

In addition to the considerable difficulties incurred by what was classified as an inter-racial marriage in a place where slavery was still in practice, was also the curious difference in age between William and Eveline. Eveline is recorded in various places as being anywhere from ten to seventeen years older than her husband. Fifteen years is probably the correct amount. The U.S. census taken in Charleston County, South Carolina in 1850, one year after the Wagners were married, records Eveline's age as 40 and William's as 25. It also reports him living separately, but both were residing in the Christ Church parish district surrounding and including Fort Moultrie.¹⁴ William was still a private in the army living at Fort Moultrie. Eveline is listed as Eveline DeBau, the head of a household in which the children Octavius Aimar, age 15, Achills [sic] Aimar, 11, Laura Aimar, 10, and William Aimar, an infant, also lived. This obviously adds to the mystery of Mrs. Wagner's past history. Whether she was married before and whether the children whom she cared for were wards, legitimate or illegitimate sons and daughters can not be determined with certainty.¹⁵ The infant who is recorded as William Aimar is probably the same person later known as Joseph William Wagner the son of William and Eveline who was born in Moultrieville, South Carolina in 1850.¹⁶ The fact that his surname is recorded as Aimar indicates it may have been necessary for the Wagners to keep their marriage a secret at that time.

William Wagner's military enlistment expired in 1851. As a private citizen he continued to live and work in the Charleston area for four years. What occupation he might have pursued is unknown. Wagner appears, however, to have kept in close contact with his army friends. He may have been employed in a civilian position at the fort, perhaps as a baker.¹⁷ During this interval the Wagners had two more children, a boy whose name is unknown, and in 1852, a daughter named Elizabeth, but who became known as Rose.

In January of 1855, Company I, William Wagner's former unit, was sent to reopen Fort Dallas at the Miami River. Although there was little

activity in the on-going Seminole Wars, the settlement on the Miami River feared an Indian reaction to their presence. Among the officers with Company I was Captain Lawrence P. Graham who had been at Governor's Island and through the Mexican War with Wagner.¹⁸ Company I was a sizable regiment and in fact constituted the largest group of soldiers ever occupying the fort on a continuing basis. A considerable amount of new construction made Fort Dallas a far more formidable presence.

By 1855 William Wagner must have realized that his and his family's future prospects in Charleston were limited. It is probable that he often heard talk of the South Florida area from military friends who were active in the Seminole Wars. They would have told him of a relatively unthreatening situation with the Seminoles, who by 1855 had been effectively reduced in number, and of large tracts of available land. There was now also the added opportunity of a large military installation being established in a place where the personnel would have little access to additional provisions or conveniences. Wagner, with a partner, Captain Sinclair, decided to try out South Florida and open a sutler's store for the soldiers at the fort.

The title of Captain seems to have come to Sinclair through the ownership and operation of schooners out of Charleston's harbor.¹⁹ Whether or not he met Wagner in the army is unknown. At any rate in 1855 they followed the troops to Fort Dallas and opened their store on the north bank of the river where the fort was located and built a steam-powered coontie mill a mile and a half up river on Wagner Creek. If Sinclair was not formerly enlisted in the army, William's useful military connections supported by Sinclair's capital may have been the basis for their partnership.

With no home waiting for them and the uncertainty of whether he would want to remain permanently in South Florida, Wagner decided to leave his wife and young daughter in South Carolina for the time being. There is some evidence that Wagner brought at least one, perhaps two of the male children with him. Since his own boys were quite young, it may be that some of the Aimars accompanied him. They built a house near the mill sometime between 1855 and 1858. Wagner's home which Sinclair may also have lived in when he was around, was a one and a half story wood frame structure. Many early settlers' homes in the area were sided with nothing more than palmetto fronds because milled lumber was expensive and difficult to come by. Some pioneers, such as George Ferguson, did erect more substantial structures, but most dwellings in the

river settlement were of a temporary nature. In 1855, with significant construction taking place at Fort Dallas, Wagner may have had access to extra building supplies and experienced labor because of his friendships with members of Company I.²⁰

The Miami River settlement between 1855 and 1858 became a bustling place. In addition to the friendship, help, and income, the soldiers at Fort Dallas also provided a reassuring presence. The fort itself was becoming an impressive and scenic complex. While the settlement had its share of drifters, it also had Mr. Ferguson and Dr. Fletcher who provided an air of respectability and permanence. Coontie was getting a fair price in the Key West markets, and the U.S.'s southernmost town was accessible enough to keep Miami's pioneers from being completely cut off from the outside world.

By 1858 Wagner was apparently satisfied enough with his life in South Florida to send for the remainder of his family. Whether or not Wagner felt the area conducive to raising a family, it was becoming obvious that the political strife between the North and South would eventually erupt, and that Charleston would not be a safe place in which to live.

In February of 1858, six-year-old Rose, her mother Eveline, and probably some other members of the family,²¹ boarded Captain Sinclair's schooner, the *William and John* in Charleston's harbor. Rose was very excited at the prospect of being reunited with her father and brothers whom she had not seen in two years. The voyage south was both rough and eventful. The schooner was to make its first stop at Indian River, but had to anchor outside the inlet because it was too shallow to get in. The *William and John* remained anchored there for one week during which time weather conditions worsened. The schooner rocked and twisted around the rough seas terrifying her passengers, making them fear becoming bait for wreckers. Finally when the Captain attempted to bring her in, he ran aground on a sand bar, but the ship eventually bumped and creaked her way across the bar into still water near shore.

At Indian River the *William and John* was to meet another of Sinclair's vessels, the *Julia Gordon*, which was late in arriving, forcing Eveline and Rose to wait three more weeks. The delay made it necessary for the *William and John* to return to Charleston and the passengers and cargo had to be transferred to the *Julia Gordon* for the last leg of the journey. When once again outside the sand bar, Rose and Eveline found themselves tossed about in another storm even worse than the previous one. All passengers were sent below deck, the hatches were battered

down above them and Rose, Eveline, and their fellow travelers found themselves in the dark hull listening to the sounds of the crew running back and forth to secure water casks which were rolling around on the deck.²²

The experience frightened young Rose terribly. She was greatly relieved on March 15, 1858 to finally round Cape Florida and enter Biscayne Bay at about sundown. Fort Dallas was an enchanting sight to the weary seafarers. Rose described her first impression of the Miami settlement:

Such a sight I had never seen before. The beautiful coconut trees, tall and slender, and the officers quarters fine buildings nine in number all facing the bay. . . also stars and stripes floating from a tall flagstaff erected on the parade ground, all was clean and covered with Bermuda grass.

A boat named *Mavenia* was sent from shore to bring us off the schooner; and I first set foot in Florida at a rock-landing in the Miami River.²³

William Wagner was not at the fort to meet his family having no way of knowing when they would arrive or even at this point, if they ever would. The storms that had plagued the *William and John* and the *Julia*



Fort Dallas, circa 1883.

Gordon had broken up several other ships. He and the boys who must have been concerned, had their fears allayed when shortly after dark they heard the rumblings and rattles of a horse and cart.²⁴ Soon the arrivals were affectionately greeted and offered a supper of baked opossum which they politely declined.

Once dinner was over, the stories of the voyage and pioneering were interrupted by a group of soldiers who had come to serenade the newly arrived Wagner women. The soldiers were South Carolinians who were well acquainted with Mrs. Wagner. There was much gaiety at the Wagner house that night. Singing and exchanging tales of Charleston and life on the Miami River kept the visitors and new arrivals up until well after midnight.

By the time Rose and Eveline arrived at their destination on that day in March it was getting too dark for them to see much of their new home. The first thing the next morning, however, all were up and ready to explore the strange wilderness surrounding them. William and the boys took Eveline and young Rose around to see the sights.²⁵ Probably the first point of interest was their own place. From the small porch at the front of the house they could see the coontie mill and narrow creek by which it stood. Much of the land around the Wagner home site was flat and rocky pine land, but there were also the hardwood hammocks nearer the river which were unlike anything that Charleston had to offer. The Miami River, crystal clear and brimming with fish, was also a main attraction.

It is likely that Wagner took his wife and daughter to meet some of their new neighbors and fellow pioneers. George Ferguson lived on the south side of the river near the Wagner place. The post office was located at Ferguson's. From there a trip up river to see the rapids and the rim of the Everglades might have been on the agenda that day.

One of Rose's most vivid memories was of her first personal encounter with some of the local Indians. A flag of peace was raised at Fort Dallas in that year, and Indians were beginning to make friends with some of the settlers. They certainly knew that it was no longer to their advantage to continue active hostilities with the whites. Yet their reputation as warriors followed them, and Seminoles were still a fearful sight to many. The Wagners were reunited for about six weeks when on a Sunday morning William, Eveline, Rose, one of the boys, and a man named Roberson were walking towards the hub of the Miami settlement at the river mouth when they met a group of seventeen Indians. Among the group was Old Tiger Tail, Matlow, Billie Harney, Old Alec and Big Tom, also known as Snake Creek Tom.²⁶ Old Tiger Tail introduced himself and

shook hands with all the Wagner party who shortly thereafter invited the entire assemblage back to their house. When they arrived at the Wagner's Tiger Tail and company stood outside as a meal and coffee were hastily prepared. Cooking at this time was done outside around a campfire located near the house. Rose's later description of the event indicates that the meal was eaten either inside or on the front porch. After supper Wagner noticed that the clothing of the Indians was particularly tattered and he gave them all the spare wearing apparel there was about the house. Apparently he later had to go over to Fletcher's store to replace the clothes he gave away, but his friendliness and generosity made life-long friends of the Indians, one of whom would later save the life of his son, William Jr.

It seems the Wagners were rather outgoing people who did quite a lot of entertaining at their home. Many of the Indians stayed late that night and sat around a campfire silently watching the boys play tricks on one another. One prank brought a delighted exclamation of "whoop, Jesus Christ" from young Johnnie Jumper.²⁷ Some of the Indians camped on the Wagner property during the night, but left early the next morning.

Although the immediate Wagner family at this time consisted of Eveline, William, their daughter, and two sons, there are indications that others also lived with them. Rose mentions "colored help" and other "men folk" as being attached in some way to the Wagner place, but is no more specific.²⁸ It may be that the Wagner/Sinclair mill was larger than the usual single family operation. Considering that they originally owned the sutler's store and the mill concurrently, they must have employed some help and it would not have been unusual for a number of people outside the Wagner family to be occupying the same house.

Fort Dallas was the center of the Miami pioneer community. Many of the soldiers brought their families with them, spurring a good deal of social activity. A scattering of houses and tents surrounded the barracks and the soldiers planted flower and vegetable gardens. Wagner's friends at the fort provided his family with all the fresh vegetables they could eat. However, soon after Rose's and Eveline's arrival, the soldiers at the fort began preparing to leave for their new assignment in Key West. This meant the Wagners were to lose a large number of their friends, not to mention a significant portion of their income because there would no longer be enough business to support the sutler's store. With the population of Miami so drastically reduced, Dr. Fletcher's store, and Mr. Ferguson's, were more than adequate.

The next couple of years in Miami between 1858, and the beginning of the Civil War, were quiet ones for the Wagner family. In fact, the area appears to have experienced a mini-depression. Late in 1858, Ferguson sold his mill, the post office, and small store to George Lewis who had come a few months before. His was the largest factory operating in Miami, but Lewis did not continue it on the same scale. He retained a scaled down mill, the store, and post office. The latter two relied on the monthly visits of Samuel Filer's schooner, the *Joshua Skinner*, to bring the mail and supplies from Key West.²⁹

In 1859, Captain Sinclair divested himself of his interest in the Wagner Creek mill. With the secession of the Southern states imminent, he had to attend to his interests in South Carolina. Many of Ferguson's former employees had been forced either to find other means of support or leave the area. The same was probably true for any extra help employed by the Sinclair/Wagner mill. Especially after the store was closed. Wagner and his sons could operate the mill by themselves, or with little additional labor.

In general, Miami's pioneers were forming a friendly and fraternal little community, but there was at least one man possessed of some of the wild and lawless nature that is frequently associated with frontiersmen. George Marshall was one of these. Marshall had lived in Miami since 1828. He fled with the other residents during the Indian uprisings in the 1830s, but unlike many others he returned. In 1843 he applied for a land grant on the Miami River under the Armed Occupation Act. In 1844 he was listed among the jurors in Dade County. Marshall was apparently given to drunken rages and while in that condition on February 14, 1861, he shot and killed one of the Wagner boys in front of George Lewis' store.³⁰ Dade County did not have its own sheriff at that time and so it was necessary to send for Monroe County's sheriff, Fernando Moreno.³¹ In the intervening period, Marshall sold his hard earned property to Dr. Fletcher.³² He immediately left Miami and was never heard from again.

The murder of the Wagner boy forebode the hard times that were to come. Soon after his death came the news of the beginning of the Civil War. The mail boat was immediately stopped and word reached the Wagners that Captain Sinclair's ships, the *William and John* and the *Julia Gordon* were seized for debt and would no longer be coming to Miami.³³ This left the Wagners and their fellow settlers more isolated than they had been in years.

As the Civil War commenced the allegiance of a number of people became obvious. While George Lewis, John Adams, and Dr. Fletcher involved themselves in blockade running, Wagner seems to have re-

mained at least outwardly impartial. There is evidence that he was a Northern sympathizer,³⁴ although as a longtime resident of the South, he may have empathized with the Confederates in certain aspects of the conflict. At any rate, Wagner was able throughout the war years to retain the friendships of Fletcher, Lewis, and Adams who were rabid Southern supporters, and also play host to a few contingents of Union blockade enforcers who visited the river settlement looking for Confederate supporters.

The most immediate concern stemming from the outbreak of the war was how to get supplies. Wagner and Nicholas Adams made at least one run for provisions,³⁵ but permission for such trips was irregular. It was during this period that Wagner, like many other settlers, became something of a farmer and planted a vegetable garden. The Indians told him that the most fertile soil was in the hammocks, so Wagner cleared a patch of nearby hammock and planted corn, beans, peas, and sweet potatoes. The Wagners also raised hogs and chickens, and became increasingly dependant on hunting small game and fishing. Pine wood gopher became a popular delicacy.

Besides the isolation brought on by the war, many frightening rumors circulated about the settlement. Stories of brutalities brought down on those not willing to assist parties of Northern soldiers who came ashore in Florida for additional provisions were common. Also, tales of Confederate soldiers looking for draft evaders and Union spies kept everyone alert. One day after the war had been in progress for sometime, William Wagner took his daughter and went down river to the area near the mouth where Fort Dallas and Fletcher's place were located. Dr. Fletcher called to them from across the river and related a horrifying story of an old man and his three sons who had been shot and killed by Confederates for refusing to turn over all the salt they had produced which was their means of livelihood. "Now" said Fletcher after he had finished the story, "I am a rebel and you all know it, but I can never approve of such crimes, even in war times."³⁶ Stories of war brutalities like the one Fletcher related caused the regular inhabitants of Miami to remain loyal to one another despite their variant political beliefs. It was especially crucial to pioneer families who were struggling to get by that they not lose their men to Southern or Northern "recruiters" who might pass through. Rose remembered:

Every few days word would come that the Yankees were in Miami, and about that time the men folk had business somewhere else. You could see them going past apparently, in a great hurry, and as if time was passing.³⁷

An incident occurred at the Wagner house involving one man not eager to enlist:

... (one day) ... an officer and a party of soldiers came to the house. Father (William) was at home at the time, and there was one of the soldiers who was an old friend of father's and a brother-soldier in the Mexican War. In talking of old times and noting the improvement of the guns now in use, the soldier to show how quickly they could be fired, discharged two or three shots in quick succession in a clump of palmettoes just outside the yard. Well, as it happened, a man living with us then and not caring to be seen by them had hid himself in that same clump of palmettoes. He lost no time in getting out of there, and ever after remained at the house, thinking it the safest place when soldiers were around.³⁸

On February 18, 1863 Captain English and some men from the blockade ship *Sagamore* came up river to buy supplies. One of the men on this excursion noted seeing "three men and two women living in the wilderness,"³⁹ a few miles up the river. He also recorded buying sugar cane, coconuts, lemons, limes, potatoes and fish. In another instance the same party was recorded as purchasing, "one barrel and half a dozen boxes of coontie at 6 cents the pound for a speculation in Key West where it will sell for 15 cents..."⁴⁰

Rose Wagner later recalled a group of Union blockaders coming to her house to buy some chickens and vegetables for which they gave the Wagners in exchange the first greenbacks they had ever seen. Mr. Wagner, however, refused payment. It was this same party of soldiers that on July 8, 1863, burned the mill of George Lewis and later took him into custody.

They passed by our (Wagner's) house without saying a word to any of us, never having done so before. Soon afterward a big black smoke was seen to arise from where Mr. Lewis' factory had been standing, and which could be seen by ourselves and also by the people living in Miami. Fear was pictured on our faces, we thinking the time had come when we would be left homeless.⁴¹

But that would not happen. The Wagners passed through the war unscathed, although not completely removed from its effects. That was not the case for many in Miami involved in peripheral war-time activities. The close of the war, much like the closing of Fort Dallas, left Miami in a quiet and somewhat abandoned state. The Wagner place became the only home site up river. Many inhabitants had moved, or were taken away. George Lewis returned briefly to get his personal effects from William Wagner and moved on. He left his former slave, old Benjamin Tiner, with the Wagners. Although Tiner was now a free man he stayed with the Wagners until his death in 1869.⁴²

In the spring of 1866, when Miami was once again peaceful, the Wagner family had a visitor who planned to end that serenity. He was William H. Gleason, obviously no ordinary man. Mr. Gleason engaged John Addison who had recently settled at the Hunting Grounds, to bring him to Miami from his place. On a trip up the Miami River Wagner entertained the party before they proceeded on their journey.

When Gleason later returned to Miami with William Hunt and both their families, they were greeted by the Wagners and others with some excitement. Like the Indian Wars, the Civil War thwarted any progress in the development of Miami. When Gleason and Hunt explained their intentions to develop the area, they must have sounded very appealing, especially since they claimed to have the backing and authority of the U.S. government. The two men had tried to convince the Freedman's Bureau in Washington to allow them to establish former slaves in South Florida in exchange for large land grants. The failure of that endeavor did not stop them from coming to Miami and erroneously claiming title to the Fort Dallas property.

Hunt befriended a number of settlers including William Wagner, and gave them advice and assistance in making their homesteads more productive. Hunt seized an opportunity to ingratiate himself to Mr. Wagner by helping him with his farming techniques. In the late spring and early summer of 1866, there was so much rainfall in the Dade County area that all of the lowlands, (much of Miami), were flooded. Wagner's garden in the hammock, at that time producing pumpkins, watermelon, and cabbage, was completely washed away into the creek and water was waist deep everywhere around the Wagner home. Mr. Wagner was so frustrated at the loss of his hard-earned crop that he vowed never again to plant vegetables. After hearing of Wagner's difficulty with farming, Hunt, who had recently begun to cultivate property near the Wagners, brought him a variety of garden seeds. As soon as the ground dried enough Hunt convinced Wagner of the potential for a winter crop. For the first time Wagner planted during the late summer and produced the most successful crop he ever had. From this time forward the Wagner family was never without fresh vegetables.⁴³

With Hunt's and Gleason's arrival pioneer interest in political activities picked up considerably. It was during this period that the county gained a reputation for its sordid frontier politics. In 1868 Nelson English, supervisor of registration from Monroe County, came to register the voters of Dade. William Wagner was among those registered. The election of 1868 placed W.H. Gleason in the office of Lieutenant Governor, and his cronies in lesser positions. Soon after a board of County

Commissioners was appointed. Although William Wagner seems to have been an interested political observer, he did not at this time assume any political position.

The year 1869 was a busy one for the Wagner family. It was the year Rose made her first trip to Key West in the company of her brother; the year in which her father filed a homestead claim; and the year that Octavius Aimar is first known to be living in Dade. The first record of Aimar is his appointment as chairman of the Board of Public Instruction for Dade County on July 21, 1869.⁴⁴ Exactly when Aimar arrived is not known. It might be assumed that since he received a fairly significant county appointment, that he had been in the area for at least a year or two. In Rose Wagner Richards' memoirs, however, there is no mention of Octavius Aimar. Whether he lived with the Wagners at any time, or if his relationship to the family was generally known, is not apparent.

In 1870 Aimar⁴⁵ did file a claim for a homestead. That was one year after William Wagner had done the same.⁴⁶ With the population of the river settlement steadily increasing Wagner probably decided it wise to acquire legal title to his land, something he had not previously found necessary.

Upon Rose and William Jr.'s return from Key West, they found that Hunt and Gleason, with some bitterness, had been forced off their Fort Dallas property and that the new and legitimate owner, Dr. J.V. Harris of Louisiana, was soon to arrive. Harris and his family were warm and friendly people who quickly made friends. During their brief residence on the Miami River one of the more colorful events of the pioneer era occurred and it involved Harris, William Wagner, his son William Jr., Octavius Aimar, and many others living here at the time. On October 21, 1870 a serious storm struck the area and deposited the large brig, *The Three Sisters*⁴⁷ on a sand bar off Virginia Key. Abandoned by her crew and listing severely the ship must have seemed a gift of providence to the settlers. Dr. Harris was first to notice the wreck. Harris joined by Harrison Drew and Luke Nicholson went out to the vessel to lay claim as "wreckmaster." After determining that the hull contained valuable lumber, Drew and Nicholson returned to shore for supplies. Harris remained on board to protect his claim. Unfortunately as soon as the two men got back, the weather began to worsen and it was four days before they were able to return to the stranded Harris. During the interim, word of the wreck spread quickly and as soon as the weather cleared, residents climbed into their small boats or the nearest thing that would float, to get to the wreck. Harris was found a little the worse for wear, but made a full

recovery. The men began working to lash together boards to make rafts capable of floating the lumber back to shore.⁴⁸ After a few days *The Three Sisters* was emptied and mysteriously burned. The lumber was disbursed among the many settlers who took part in the salvage. Most thought that in an area as remote as Dade County that that would be the end of the matter. On November 28 the acting consul for the Port of Key West, filed a libel for restitution in the District Court of the United States, Southern District of Florida, charging J.V. Harris, William Wagner, William Wagner, Jr., Charles E. Barnes, Daniel Clark, William Benest, Samuel Jenkins, Washington Jenkins, Joseph Jenkins, Francis Infinger, John Addison, William Rigby, Michael Sayers, George Sayers, Isaiah Hall, and John Holman with the illegal seizure of cargo.⁴⁹ Later others were added to the list; Octavius Aimar, Luke Nicholson, John Frow, Edward Pent and Harrison Drew.

Through their attorney, the men submitted the following statement on February 23, 1871:

While admitting that they did take out the lumber "with much time, exposure and arduous labor" they agreed that "they knew that their labor and exposure in resqueing [sic] this lumber from impending total loss gave them a greater vested interest in it than other parties possessed and they desired to appeal to an admiralty tribunal to award them salvage; but no such tribunal existed in this district and they felt under no obligation to charter vessels to freight the lumber to Key West, a course that would only accumulate needless expense...⁵⁰

The hearing was originally scheduled for May 1871, but many of those charged did not come to court. Because of additional complications, the trial was not held until the spring of 1872. At that time all the libelees appeared in Key West for trial. The final decision was rendered January 3, 1873. A transcript of the trial does not exist so exactly what evidence the outcome was based on is not known, but Rose Wagner wrote:

At last the trial was over and all came out fair excepting my father, William Wagner, Samuel Jenkins and Isaiah Hall. Each one was fined one hundred and fifty dollars and two months in the county jail of Monroe County, they also having to pay one dollar per day board, and were fed on grits, black strap called syrup, and dirty water for coffee. I can assure you that father never troubled himself with any more wrecks after that time.⁵¹

The early 1870s was the period in which the pioneer era really came to life, and at the same time was firmly set on a path to extinction. While

The Three Sisters case was dragging on, other events occurred to divert the Wagner family interests. In 1871 Rose Wagner had a son, Henry, with Harrison Drew⁵² who was also involved in *The Three Sisters* incident. There is no record of their marriage, but when Rose later married Adam Richards, her marriage certificate stated that she was a widow. Drew left Dade County for South America soon after Henry's birth and was never heard from again.⁵³

In the year 1872 there was another election and this time the ballot gained some attention. William Gleason, whose reputation was already slipping due to his escapades in Tallahassee and Miami, was running for state legislator, and his friend and fellow carpetbagger, Ephraim T. Sturtevant, for state senator. It was a hotly contested election, and a very close one. Although both men were candidates, Gleason served as clerk and Sturtevant was one of the inspectors of the election. The day before the ballots were to be cast, William Wagner's name was struck from the list of voters⁵⁹ indicating that he was no supporter of the local carpetbag regime. The grounds for his removal were that Wagner had been convicted of a felonious crime. No further explanation was given. Wagner's removal from the voting list came before the final decision was rendered in the case before the Wrecking Court, but after the trial. This action may have been taken as a result of Wagner's conviction in that matter; however, others convicted in *The Three Sisters* incident remained on the 1872 list of registered voters.⁵⁵ The final result of the election was that Gleason and Sturtevant were seated. Wagner's vote might indeed have made a crucial difference.

In the summer of 1873 a yellow fever epidemic struck Key West and was spread to the Miami settlement by Charles Barnes. Among those stricken with the disease was William Wagner, Jr. The young man was very ill, and Dr. Harris had given up on him. Not long after, an Indian came by the Wagner house and spoke to Rose asking where William, Jr. was. Having been told he was sick, the brave asked to see William and went into the house. He soon left saying he would be back. The Indian went to dig up a medicinal root, called "Indian Root", used to treat such illnesses. He returned to the Wagner house and made a tea for William to drink and bathed his face and body in the water.⁵⁶ William took a turn for the better and recovered fully from the malady. The Wagners felt deeply indebted to the Indian, whose name is unknown, and credited him with saving the young man's life.

By the early 1870s, with the opening of William Brickell's trading post on the Miami River, settlers began seeing Indians a lot more

frequently. So it was with great surprise that the Wagners greeted the rumor that the Indians were planning to attack the settlement. Everyone was gathering at Dr. Harris' where they felt they might be safe until passage to Key West could be arranged. John Holman, the Wagner's closest neighbor at the time, came by to tell them of the plan. William Wagner, apparently distrusted the information because he sent his son to Miami to see what was going on. The worst was confirmed by those present at the Harris' and William, Jr. returned to tell his family to start packing up what they could. Dr. Fletcher, who previously had moved away, was visiting the Wagners at this time and was in very poor health, presenting a dilemma for the family. They felt he would not survive the journey to Key West, yet leaving him there alone was unthinkable. It was decided that they would all leave and take their chances.

It was at this time, with the help of the horse and cart brother was taking provisions and bedding to the boat at the river landing that he was stopped by Old Aleck and Billie Harney and asked what he was doing. Brother told them and asked them if it was not true that they were going to fight. They answered "No, Indian no want to fight," and taking the horse by the bridle returned both horse and cart with all in it back to the house, assuring us in every way they could that the Indians would not fight any more, unloading the things from the cart themselves before leaving for their camp up the river and to which place Miami Jimmie, who had been to our house first that morning, and to whom mother had told the reports of the Indians wanting to fight, had hurried off and it was through him that Old Aleck and Billie Harney came soon after with the result just stated.

Jimmie was dispatched with all haste to their other camps at the head of Little River and Snake Creek, from which place old Tiger Tail, at the head of eight or ten other Indians, came to Miami and Jimmie returned to the camp up the river from which place old Aleck and Billie Harney, with Jimmie, came to our house first and from there to Miami, father and brother going with them.

All the Indians were wearing white feathers in their head-dress the emblem of peace. Had it been in the night instead of daylight, when the Indians were on their way to Miami, there would no doubt have been bloodshed as the people were watching and expecting them.⁵⁷

Luckily, the situation was remedied amicably largely due to the level-headedness of the Wagners, and the friendships they had cultivated with the Indians.

The Wagners had another set of visitors that year, 1873, of a very different ilk. Vice President of the United States, Schuyler Colfax and Senators Osborn and Horatio Bisbee, Jr. stopped briefly in Miami.⁵⁸

They were met by the unlikely pair of W.H. Gleason and Dr. Harris who apparently put aside their differences for the occasion. The visitors were interested in seeing the Everglades and on their way up river stopped at the Wagner house. They were extended an invitation to come for dinner on their return, which they accepted. Mrs. Wagner prepared a feast of local specialties including a large "Leather Back" or soft shelled turtle, and coontie pudding for which Eveline had gained a local reputation.

Life for the Wagner family seems to have passed pretty uneventfully through 1875. By the following year things began to pick up. In August of 1875, Wagner was required to make the final "proof" in Gainesville for his homestead claim. That was a difficult and costly journey and Wagner wrote the following letter to the U.S. Land Office there:

Gents. I respectfully ask permit to make proof on my Homestead before County Clerk of Dade County where I reside. I forewarded my application through Mr. Hunt some time since unattended by the necessary affidavits as I am now informed. I am not in possession of the number of my certificate having been for'd [sic]⁵⁹

Letters from two witnesses were also submitted, Andrew Price and William J. Wagner, Jr. testifying that Wagner was too ill to make the trip. This may or may not have been the case. It is probable, that he just wished to avoid traveling to Gainesville. His request was apparently approved because on December 28, 1875 he filed his final proof with William Gleason, the County Clerk for Dade.⁶⁰ As proof of his claim, Wagner submitted that he had plowed, fenced, and cultivated about five acres of said land and that he had built one mill house, 40 by 30 feet, one dwelling 20 by 25 feet, another dwelling, 20 by 15 feet and one church, 40 by 10 feet, all were wood frame construction with shingle roofs. He also noted the presence of orange, lime, lemon, guava and citron trees on his property.⁶¹ On January 31, 1878, his claim was approved and William Wagner was granted title to the forty acres of land in Section 35 that he had requested.⁶²

The church mentioned in the homestead proof was built in 1875 by the Wagners who were a Catholic family. The first priest known to have visited the Wagners was Father Defau who came in 1872 and stayed three weeks. During that period Holy Mass was celebrated every day, and on Sundays the neighbors and many Indians attended services at the Wagner house. Father Defau was sent to Miami specifically to preach to the Indians,⁶³ however, he seems to have had more lasting success among the settlers. The next priest who visited the Wagner family was Father Fammie in 1874. A year later the Right Reverend Bishop Verot, the



Catholic church built by William Wagner in 1875, circa 1890.

Bishop of Saint Augustine, with Father Larocque of Key West, came to the Wagner house to conduct confirmation services. He recommended that William build a small church and promised to send a priest to conduct services at least once a year. The religious ceremonies held at the Wagners' thus far had been well attended so William Wagner, as much for the pioneer community as his own family, constructed the first church in the pioneer settlement at Miami. Father Hugon of Key West came to dedicate the church in the spring of 1876.⁶⁴ He arrived by schooner from Key West and was brought up river to the Wagners by John Adams. Father Hugon stayed with the Wagners for more than three weeks and conducted Easter services for many of the early residents of Dade County.

It was only a few months before Father Hugon returned. On September 5, 1876, he married Rose and Adam Richards.⁶⁵ Richards, a relative newcomer, had ended up in Miami through a roundabout route. He was born in Ohio on January 4, 1849.⁶⁶ In 1858 he moved to Indiana with his family where he remained until 1873. At the age of twenty-four

Adam Richards decided to strike out on his own; first to New York and then, in a truly adventuresome spirit, to Venezuela. Later in life Mr. Richards was quoted as saying: "I'd be there yet if a kind-hearted American consul had not turned a sympathetic ear to recital of my troubles."⁶⁷ The consul managed to obtain passage for Adam and his traveling companions, to Key West via Cuba. On January 26, 1875 Richards and his friends arrived in Miami. His friends, who were trained mechanics, could find no work in that field in the pioneer settlement on the Miami River, so they moved on. Mr. Richards, however, had but one Venezuelan penny and fifty-three cents in American money in his pocket so he was compelled to stay. He found work with Jonathan Lovelace, then running the Fort Dallas property for the Biscayne Bay Company, a Georgia-based firm that had purchased it in 1876. Adam worked at a number of odd jobs until he went into the starch business with William Wagner.

The second, smaller house mentioned in Wagner's homestead claim became the first home of Rose and Adam Richards. It is not clear if it was built expressly for them as they sometimes claimed because it was standing almost a year before they were married.⁶⁸ Maude Richards Black, Adam's and Rose's second child, claimed that her father built the house⁶⁹ which may be the case since he could easily have worked for Wagner before marrying Rose.

The wedding of Rose and Adam was quite a social event in the fledgling settlement. The first marriage in the first church was an occasion attended by many pioneers as well as a number of Indians. To the Indians, the ceremony was a peculiar event which they watched with some astonishment.

The Richards had been married scarcely a month when the area was struck by one of the most severe hurricanes in years. On October 20 and 21 the storm passed just to the west of Miami, but close enough for the full force of the winds and rains to be felt in the Miami settlement. Just how serious a gale it was when it hit Miami is not known with certainty for the obvious reason that the instrumentation available at the time was not what it is today. Indications are, however, that the October hurricane was not forceful enough to do much serious damage.⁷⁰ The Wagner homestead did feel its effects though. Adam Richards later told his son Charlie about the storm and left him with the impression that the Wagner house was damaged.⁷¹ Not so much though that it could not be repaired.

November 1876 brought another election to Dade County and the nation. Samuel J. Tilden was running against Rutherford B. Hayes for the

presidency. Dade County still had William Gleason to contend with. William Wagner remained off the list of registered voters in 1876, but both Adam Richards and William Wagner, Jr. did participate in the proceedings.⁷² It was an election in which tempers flared so hotly that there was almost bloodshed resulting from the outrage of the voters who were fed up with Gleason's carpetbag regime in Dade County. The animosity towards Gleason was prevalent since the 1872 election which he had manipulated in his favor. This time he was not so successful, Israel M. Stewart and John J. Brown, the same candidates defeated in 1872, were duly elected to the respective posts of State Senator, and Legislator ending an era in local pioneer politics.

Feelings in the Wagner family against William Gleason ran high, some of his antics had affected them directly. William Wagner's being sticken from the voters list in 1872, was no doubt a humiliation. One wonders also if the incident in 1869, when the Wagner's marriage was called into question, was not an early form of intimidation instigated by Gleason. Gleason's presence most certainly had something to do with Wagner filing for a homestead when he did.⁷³ But besides the petty and underhanded politics the Gleason era brought something else to the residents of Dade County; attention. More and more people were coming to the area with big ideas and enough capital behind them to make their plans a reality. Although it would still be a few years before anything substantial in the development of the area would occur, many pioneers realized the value of legal title to a piece of good land.

During the early pioneer years after the final closing of Fort Dallas, William and Eveline Wagner attained a fairly prominent position in the social structure of the Miami River settlement. Not in the same sense as in an urbanized society where status is related to ancestry and material achievement, but in an isolated wilderness society where respect is accorded to those who have the ability to live by their wits, the Wagners held a high place. They were also known for their kindness. They befriended many of the Indians and helped introduce them to a community that feared them needlessly. The Wagners freely gave from their belongings, fed the hungry, cared for the sick, and housed the wandering. All indications are that they were honest, fair, and generous people. They also seemed to enjoy a good time. There were frequently occasions for large gatherings at the Wagner homestead. Passers-by were often invited to a meal, soldiers came to serenade, Indians to watch rowdy young boys play tricks on each other by the campfire, and others just to visit and pass the time or discuss politics.⁷⁴ Still others came to worship, although it is

doubtful that the services at the Wagner household and later in the church, were formal or excluded anyone of a different faith. Residents could rely on the Wagners to help out in many types of circumstances. In April of 1875, even before their chapel was erected, a funeral was held at the Wagner's for another pioneer, Mike Fallons who had died of consumption. He was buried on their property in ground that had been consecrated by Bishop Verot a few days before.⁷⁵

Unfortunately, although there are frequent references to the Wagner family in the public documents and private records of this period, a clear picture of what Eveline and William were personally like, is not drawn. One thing is clear, they were both individualists, unafraid to break the taboos of the day. William's grandson, Charles Richards, later claimed that Wagner was not given to a lot of small talk, or story telling, "I'd put it this way," he said, "he was full-blooded German."⁷⁶ Eveline may have been the more outgoing of the two, since they seem to have been quite sociable as a couple.

The last half of the 1870s progressed smoothly for the Wagner and Richards families. William, William, Jr. (Bill), Adam, probably with the help of young Henry, ran the coontie mill. In 1877 Rose and Adam had their first child, John Paul, and two years later their second, a daughter named Sarah Elizabeth, (she later became known as Maude). By the late 1870s the Wagner place became purely a family operation. Previous to this period the Wagners seem to have frequently had people outside their immediate family living with them, either as boarders, hired help, or partners in the mill. This was not unusual on a pioneer homestead, particularly if one did not have a large family. There were many duties and chores that had to be performed to keep the homestead's inhabitants supplied with the necessities of life. Besides the mill, the Wagner place now had a two-acre orange grove,⁷⁷ the vegetable garden, and some chickens. With the presence of the Richards, Henry and William, Jr., the Wagners seem to have been fairly self-sufficient.

Adam Richards, like his in-laws, had the luck and character to make a successful pioneer. Richards was a friendly, gregarious man, known for telling stories of his past and present exploits.⁷⁸ Soon after his arrival in Dade County, he began to take an active part in the growing community. In 1877 he was appointed tax collector and assessor and his first duty was to collect the back taxes for 1875 as well as assessing and collecting the taxes for 1877 and 1878. It was not an easy job as Richards recalled later in life:

We had tough times in those days. Methods of earning a little money were few and far between and it was seldom that the people here had more than

a few dollars to their names. Although the poll tax was only \$1, voters often had a hard time scraping together that extra dollar, and on one occasion I had to accept a fat loggerhead turtle instead of cash. I ate the turtle and paid the tax myself.⁷⁹

To fulfill the responsibilities of his job, Mr. Richards had to travel the length of the county which was a difficult task in those days considering the lack of transportation. He made one trip to assess the properties, then tabulated his estimates and returned to collect the taxes. It took up to several weeks to collect from the northern end of the county going the route along the beach. When Richards set out on his long walk, he carried a canvas bag containing two blankets, a coat, hard bread, cured meats, coffee, tea, sugar and canned milk, as well as an empty tin can in which to cook his food. Under his arm he bore two tax books, each 24 by 16 inches.⁸⁰ All this equipment made the walk much harder, additionally he had to find means of getting his belongings across the rivers which cut into the beach along the coast. At the Lake Worth inlet he had the terrifying experience of being brushed by a shark while wading across. He made it to dry land, but a mile further along he was confronted by a large panther. This was the last trip Adam Richards made as tax collector. On several occasions he paid the tax himself. One time he hired a boat captain for a fee of fifteen dollars, to collect the taxes in the Lake Worth district. When the captain returned he had only one dollar of the due revenue.⁸¹

Tax collector was only one of the appointed positions Richards held. He was also a deputy sheriff for Dade County, and in 1880, the census enumerator.⁸² After a few years of the rugged life of a public servant, Adam decided he preferred making a living as a private citizen. He had continued assisting William with the coontie mill. In 1882 he began raising crops on his father-in-law's homestead and on some of the Biscayne Bay Company tract which was then run by J.W. Ewan. This produce was not only intended for local use but also for shipment north, supposedly making Adam Richards the first person in the Miami area to raise a crop for the northern winter market. He planted tomatoes, beans and eggplant, picked them green and crated the vegetables for transport.⁸³ It was a very risky venture considering how lax ship captains could be in keeping to schedules. Richards did have some success, however, and for a time sold his produce in New York and New Orleans for as high as sixteen dollars per barrel for eggplant, and seven dollars and fifty cents for a crate of beans.⁸⁴

Through the early years of their marriage Rose was kept occupied giving birth and raising her children. After John Paul, and Maude, came

William Franklin, on March 15, 1882, Laura Louise on May 2, 1883, Cora Amelia on April 29, 1885 and Charles Adam on July 25, 1887. While living on the Wagner homestead Rose and Adam had six of their ten children.⁸⁵

William, Jr. developed his own interests too. He frequently acted as a guide in the Everglades on hunting expeditions. He and Henry also became interested in taxidermy. In 1884 the Wagner family had Jean Chevelier living with them. He was a Frenchman who spoke little English according to one visitor, and was an expert taxidermist and collector of bird skins and plumes.⁸⁶ The exotic plumes of such South Florida birds as the egret were beginning to bring high prices in the fashionable cities. Jean Chevelier is believed to have been among the first large-scale plume hunters, and a scientific collector who gathered specimens for museums. He later settled on Possum Key.⁸⁷

During his stay with the Wagners, Chevelier had a serious accident in their home. He fell down the stairs while carrying a loaded gun, it discharged, and shot off part of his hand. He was rushed to Key West where his hand was treated. Afterward he returned to Miami to pursue his interests. The Wagners did not have any sizable boat for long hunting expeditions, so Chevelier hired Charles Pierce and his boat *The Bonton* to take himself, William, Jr. as his cook, and Henry as his taxidermist, on a hunting trip into the Everglades.

Charles Pierce mentioned the Wagner family at the time as consisting of Mr. Wagner, "an old German," his wife, William their son, about twenty-seven years of age, and Henry their grandson, seventeen. Pierce also mentioned that the Richards lived nearby with their two children.⁸⁸ The men spent several days on and about the Wagner place preparing for their journey which would last most of the summer.⁸⁹

By the late 1880s, the hard life of homesteaders was beginning to take its toll on William and Eveline, who were growing old. In February, 1887, William applied for a military pension claiming disability.⁹⁰ He was sixty-one years of age. Wagner's friend, J.V. Harris who lived in Key West at that time, wrote an accompanying letter outlining William's medical problems which were in large part related to the leg wound he received at the battle of Cerro Gordo. Harris stated that because of the swelling of the leg and painful varicose veins resulting from the wound, Wagner was no longer able to work more than a few hours a day. Wagner claimed in this affidavit that he had been in the deteriorated condition for six years.⁹¹ On January 23, 1888 he was awarded a pension of eight dollars per month.

In addition to the decline in William's health, this was a declining period for the homestead too. Adam and Rose purchased 40 acres of land

just north of what is today Matheson Hammock. It was bought on an arrangement where the purchaser made a down payment and lived on the land for a year before obtaining title from the government.⁹² In 1888 the Richards built a palmetto hut on their land and moved there with their six children. They lived on this tract for eighteen months, a tract known as the "Enfinger 40" after Francis Enfinger who had lived there previously.⁹³

It must have been around this time that Wagner's mill closed.⁹⁴ By the late 1880s the coontie root was becoming scarce, William's health was not what it had been and with Adam and Rose gone there would not have been the necessary man power to keep the mill productive. Both Henry and William, Jr. still lived in the old homestead, but they had their own pursuits.

In 1888 life changed drastically for William Wagner when his wife Eveline died at approximately 78 years of age. There is no record of her burial, although it might be assumed that she was buried on the Wagner place after a Catholic funeral service in the family chapel.

William, Jr. also moved away. He rented a place briefly on the Biscayne Bay Company tract⁹⁵ and then took up his own homestead north of his father's. By this time Adam Richards had received title to the "Enfinger 40" and made a homestead claim on an adjacent tract of land in the area that would later become South Miami. Henry remained with his grandfather. According to Charles Richards, Wagner had a couple move in to help care for him.⁹⁶

After the Richards family moved south, their small home on the Wagner place was empty for only a short time. Charles Lum, whose effort at making a coconut plantation on Miami Beach failed, moved into the house with his young wife.⁹⁷ Lum intended to start a mill there but was having no luck. According to Henry Wagner:

While willing to work he (Lum) was a farmer and nothing else. So I proposed to my grandfather Wagner that we offer to take him in with us on shares, which he accepted. He stayed a summer and winter and went back to New Jersey where he was from...⁹⁸

By now Henry was getting older and frequently was away from his grandfather's homestead. He continued to work as a guide and also to crew for some of the boats which were beginning to cruise in the waters of southeast Florida. William, whose health continued to decline was finally persuaded to sell his homestead, a decision he later regretted. His family had all moved off on their own, the mill was gone, and tragically even the little church Wagner built burned down in 1891.⁹⁹ There was also probably

considerable pressure on Wagner to sell. In the 1890s Julia Tuttle and the Brickells were buying up a great deal of land in the Miami area. On May 15, 1893 Wagner sold his forty acres to Julia Tuttle. The agreed upon sum was \$5,000, to be paid in installments after an initial down payment of \$200.¹⁰⁰ One of the older Richards boys moved the ailing Wagner into his family's home.

This was a difficult period for the Richards, even though they acquired a good deal of land. Adam was trying to make a go of another mill to earn money. They now had two more children, Harley and Anthony, making eight. Ten people in all were dependent on Adam Richards and it was a lean time for mill owners. It was an era when many of the starch mills in the county were shutting down. The final blow was a homestead rush during the last decade of the nineteenth century which closed off most of the available land to mill operators dependent on gathering the coontie roots over a wide range of territory.

There was also something different about many of the people who were moving to take up homesteads. Many of them were not so much pioneers as investors and they guarded their property jealously. A number of the homesteader neighbors of Adam Richards, even though they did not have mills of their own, would not allow him to dig coontie from their property. He soon closed his mill and began taking odd jobs in addition to some farming.¹⁰¹

Many of the people who were settling the land just south of Coconut Grove were known as "Georgia crackers."¹⁰² With racism flourishing in the South at that time, the attitudes several of these people brought with them were most cruel. The Richards' children were not allowed to go to the Coconut Grove school with the other children in the area because of their darker complexion inherited from Mrs. Wagner. Charles Richards remembered:

... they didn't let us go to school. I never had but three or four months of school. The county at that time paid one of the homesteader's wife to teach us. We went to school one term and then they cut it off.¹⁰³

In 1898, Julia Tuttle died. Before her death she had failed to pay William Wagner the remainder of her debt. Wagner who badly missed the place on the Miami River where he had spent so many years, pressed Adam Richards to file a claim against the Tuttle estate on his behalf. When Julia Tuttle died her financial matters were in such disarray that her executors were not interested in attempting to retain the Wagner property. On March 29, 1899, E.L. White, commissioner for the estate of Julia Tuttle deeded the property back to William Wagner.¹⁰⁴

Soon thereafter the Richards and William Wagner prepared to move back to the old homestead. It had changed a good deal in the few years the family was away. When they returned they did not move back into the Wagner house, but into a larger house that the Tuttle family had built. The former Richards home was gone, like the church it had burned down.¹⁰⁵ The one larger house could accommodate the family, which was still large, although the older Richards' children were beginning to set out on their own. Maude Richards, for one, did not return with her family. In 1899 she married Charles Siebold and went to live on what is now Old Cutler Road.

William Wagner, Jr. was living in Coconut Grove with his wife, the former Josephine Stowe of Charleston. He had moved to Charleston in the mid 1890s, married there, and had one child, Geneva in 1896, before returning to Miami. When they returned the young Wagner family settled in Coconut Grove, where William obtained a job working on the estate of Commodore Ralph Munroe.

Before the Richards left the South Miami area, Adam sold some of his land there, and gave much of it away to relatives who had moved to the area from the midwest. He also gave a twenty-acre tract to Henry Wagner, and several acres to Dade County for a public school,¹⁰⁶ a generous donation indeed considering his own children were not allowed to attend the public school.

William Wagner fulfilled his final wish on November 26, 1901 when he died on his homestead. Death came at age 76, the result of a combination of ailments that had plagued him for several years. Wagner wrote a will in 1899 after he regained his property. It was a succinct document stating, "To my daughter Rosie Richards of Coconut Grove,¹⁰⁷ Florida — three quarters — and to my son Joseph W. Wagner of Coconut Grove, Florida — one quarter of all my estate. . .".¹⁰⁸ He was buried, and his grave remains, in Miami City Cemetery.

It is not known what William Wagner thought of the new city of Miami that was burgeoning around him, or whether he felt he had any part in what was going on after the incorporation of Miami. Few of those very early pioneers actually did. Miami belonged to Henry Flagler after 1896. Those days before the railroad, of making coontie starch and farming must have seemed very distant.

After William's death, the Richards family remained on the homestead for a few more years and then sold the property to a real estate development firm which soon filed a subdivision plat with the county. Rose and Adam, with their younger children moved to a new house on N.E. 8th Street near 2nd Avenue, and in another twelve years or so found

themselves right in the heart of the real estate boom of the 1920s. The Wagner family, and the Richards saw Miami through a dramatic metamorphosis. The scope of the change must have been truly astounding to the elderly Richards who had wandered the hammocks, entertained Indians, and warded off everything from carpetbaggers to panthers to finally take their place in the city of Miami.

NOTES

1. U.S. Department of Commerce: *Census of the United States*, 1850, Dade County.
2. Mrs. Henry J. Burkhardt, "Starch Making: A Pioneer Florida Industry," *Tequesta*, XII (1952), p. 49.
3. U.S. Department of Commerce: *Census of the United States*, 1860, Dade County.
4. U.S. Department of Commerce: *Census of the United States*, 1850, Charleston County, South Carolina. This document indicates Private William Wagner was 25 years old in 1850 which corresponds within a year or so with successive census records from Dade County.
5. U.S. Department of Commerce: *Census of the United States*, 1850, Charleston County, South Carolina. This document records Wagner as being from Pennsylvania.
6. "Declaration for Pension of Officer, Soldier or Sailor of Mexican War", (for William Wagner), February 14, 1887.
7. Charles L. Dufour, *The Mexican War: A Compact History 1846-1848* (New York: Hawthorne Books Inc., 1968) pp.98-99.
8. "Declaration for Pension of Officer, Soldier or Sailor of Mexican War", (for William Wagner), February 14, 1887.
9. Mrs. A.C. Richards, "Reminiscences of the Early Days of Miami," *The Miami News*, series beginning October 1, 1903.
10. "Declaration for Pension Officer, Soldier or Sailor of Mexican War," (for William Wagner), February 14, 1887.
11. Charles Pierce. "The Cruise of the Bonton", *Tequesta*, XXII, (1962), p. 22. George Parsons, a resident of Miami from 1873-1875, also mentioned in his personal diary that Mrs. Wagner was Creole, and of mixed blood. George W. Parsons. Personal Diary, 1873-1875. (University of Florida Library, Gainesville, Florida), unpublished.
12. William Montgomery Clemens, ed. *North and South Carolina Marriage Records*, (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1927.)
13. Dade County, Florida, Miscellaneous Bk. A.
14. U.S. Department of Commerce: *Census of the United States*, 1850, Charleston County, South Carolina.
15. Birth Records for South Carolina prior to the year 1877 no longer exist.
16. Oby J. Bonawit. *Miami, Florida, Early Families and Records*, Miami, Fla.: Oby J. Bonawit (privately published), 1980.
17. Maude Black, Wagner's granddaughter, mentioned that she understood her grandfather was a baker when he worked at the Fort Dallas sutler's store. Maude Black, Personal Interview (by Arva Moore Parks), Miami, Fla., September 9, 1971.

18. Mrs. A.C. Richards. "Reminiscences of the Early Days of Miami," *The Miami News*, series beginning October 1, 1903.

19. Ibid.

20. In a letter to Maj. Gen. T.S. Jesup dated July 1, 1855, Louis Morris reported that lumber and shingles were purchased in New York, Savannah and Key West and were brought to Miami on shallow draft schooners. This may have constituted some of the building materials available to Wagner. Arva Moore Parks, "Where the River Found the Bay." (Historical study of the Granada Site) Miami, Florida, July, 1979.

21. None of the Aimar or other Wagner children are specifically mentioned as having come to Florida with Mrs. Wagner. However, Rose Wagner did mention others from Charleston in their party. Octavius Aimar came to Miami later and homesteaded. Mrs. A.C. Richards, "Reminiscences..."

22. Mrs. A.C. Richards, "Reminiscences..."

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid. Rose mentions that there were several people at the house who did not know them. Possibly, other people were living with Wagner at this time.

25. Mrs. A.C. Richards, "Reminiscences..."

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid. The Wagner boy (name unknown) who was shot by Marshall was a son born between William Jr. and Rose, in 1851. This would have made him only ten years old at the time of his death.

31. An act of the General Assembly, passed on December 11, 1850, consolidated Dade and Monroe counties as one Court District, and provided that court for both counties should be held at Key West. The early Monroe County sheriffs records were lost in a courthouse fire in Key West.

32. Dade County, Florida, Miscellaneous Bk. A, p. 26.

33. Mrs. A.C. Richards, "Reminiscences..."

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

39. William J. Schellings, ed., "On Blockade Duty in Florida Waters," (Excerpts from the diary of Walter Keeler Scofield), *Tequesta*, XV, (1955).

40. Ibid.

41. Mrs. A.C. Richards, "Reminiscences..."

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

44. F.M. Hudson. "Beginnings in Dade County," *Tequesta*, Vol. 1, (1943), p. 23.

45. Octavius Aimar is listed in the 1870 U.S. census for Dade County with his wife Mary and children Leopold 10, Stanislaus 8, Emile 7, and Eugene 2. Octavius, like Eveline, is recorded as mulatto.

46. U.S. Land Office. "Application for Homestead," No. 4223 (Gainesville, Florida), October 23, 1869.

47. Arva Moore Parks, "*The Wreck of The Three Sisters*," *Tequesta*, XXXI, (1971), pp. 19-28.

48. In 1870 there was no saw mill in Dade County and the settlers could not have found a cargo that would have been more valuable to them than *The Three Sisters* load.

49. Arva Moore Parks, *The Wreck of The Three Sisters*, p. 24.

50. Ibid.
51. Mrs. A.C. Richards, "Reminiscences..." Rose does mention that in 1872 articles of clothing salvaged from the wrecks *Mississippi* and *Juanietta* were purchased from the Indians by the Wagners.
52. Henry did not keep the name of Drew. He was later adopted by his grandfather William and became known as Henry Wagner.
53. Henry J. Wagner, "Early Pioneers of South Florida," p. 71.
54. Dade County Commission minutes, November 4, 1872.
55. Dade County Miscellaneous Book A, List of Registered Voters for Election, November 5, 1872, p. 19. This again adds to the speculation that Wagner may have incurred some legal complications because of his marriage before coming to Dade County.
56. Maude Richards Black, Personal Interview (by Arva Moore Parks), Miami, Florida, September 9, 1971.
57. Mrs. A.C. Richards, "Reminiscences..."
58. Ibid.
59. William Wagner, Letter to U.S. Land Office, Dade County, Florida, August 9, 1875.
60. U.S. Land Office, "Proof," Final Certificate, Gainesville, Florida: No. 996, January 3, 1876.
61. Ibid.
62. Receiver's Office, "Final Receivers Receipt," (For Homestead Application No. 4223), Gainesville, Florida: No. 996, January 31, 1876.
63. "Record of the Episcopal Acts of Rt. Rev. Augustin Verot, Bishop of Savannah and Administrator Apostolic of Florida." (On file, Diocese of Savannah), excerpts 1861-1876.
64. Mrs. A.C. Richards, "Reminiscences..."
65. Adam C. Richards, "Dade County In Its Earlier Days," (clipping), 1918.
66. Oby Bonawit. *Miami, Florida, Early Families and Records*, (Miami, Florida: Oby Bonawit, 1980).
67. "Dade History Recalled," *The Miami Herald*, May 23, 1926.
68. Wagner's homestead proof, filed December 28, 1875, first records the house.
69. Maude Black, Personal Interview (by Arva Moore Parks) Miami, Florida, September 21, 1973.
70. Arva Moore Parks, "Miami in 1876," *Tequesta*, XXXV, (1975), pp. 116-118.
71. Charles Richards. Personal Interview (by Margot Ammidown), Miami Florida, August 1, 1979.
72. Dade County, Miscellaneous Book A, p. 40.
73. Gleason was known to be land hungry and was accused during his residence in Miami of cheating several of the less educated pioneers out of their land.
74. When George Parsons visited the Wagners on Sunday, November 23, 1873, he noted in his diary that there was a fairly heated talk by Dr. Harris concerning Gleason and Hunt. George Parsons, Personal Diary 1873-1875, p. 8.
75. George Parsons, p. 204.
76. Charles Richards. Personal Interview, August 1, 1979.
77. Henry J. Wagner, "Early Pioneers of South Florida," p. 62.
78. Adam Richards' niece, Elizabeth Castle, still lives in South Miami, and remembers her uncle as being a very entertaining man. He is also referred to frequently in regard to his kindness in George Parson's recollections.
79. "Dade History Recalled," *The Miami Herald*, May 23, 1926.
80. Ibid.
81. Ibid.

82. Department of Commerce: *Census of the United States*, 1880.
83. E.V. Blackman. *Miami and Dade County, Florida*, (Washington, D.C.: Victor Rainbolt, 1921).
84. *Ibid.*
85. Oby Bonawit, *Miami, Florida Early Families and Records*. See the Richards family genealogy for a complete listing of family members.
86. Charles Pierce, *Pioneer Life in South Florida*, (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1970).
87. Charlton W. Tebeau, *Man in the Everglades*, (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1968), pp. 91-93.
88. Charles Pierce, *Pioneer Life...*
89. For a detailed account see Charles W. Pierce, "The Cruise of the Bonton," *Tequesta*, XXII, (1962).
90. "Declaration for Pension of Officer, Soldier or Sailor of Mexican War," Dade County, Florida, February 14, 1887.
91. J.V. Harris, Letter. *Ibid.*
92. Charles Richards, Personal Interview (by William M. Straight, M.D.), Miami, Florida. July 27, 1968.
93. Charles Richards, Personal Interview (by Margot Ammidown), Miami, Florida, August 1, 1979. Mrs. Richards claimed that she lived there eighteen months and killed eighteen rattlesnakes.
94. The last recorded reference to the Wagner mill is in 1886 when it was visited by a Mr. Cash. He also noted that William Wagner was a County Commissioner in that year. F.M. Hudson. "Beginnings in Dade County." *Tequesta*, Vol. 1, (1943).
95. Maude Black and Charles Richards, Personal Interview, September 21, 1973.
96. Charles Richards, Personal Interview, August 1, 1979.
97. Henry J. Wagner, "Early Pioneers of South Florida."
98. *Ibid.* Lum was probably taken in on shares in the grove and produce business, however, this might also refer to the last days of the mill.
99. Mrs. A.C. Richards, "Reminiscences..."
100. Dade County, Deed Book I, p. 139.
101. One of the odd jobs Richards had was as a handy man at the Peacock's Inn in Coconut Grove.
102. Charles Richards, Personal Interview, August 1, 1979. Richards died at age 95 on Oct. 28, 1982.
103. *Ibid.*
104. Dade County, Deed Book U, p. 285.
105. Charles Richards. Personal Interview, August 1, 1979.
106. *Ibid.*
107. This will was written in August of 1899 before the family had actually moved back to Miami.
108. William Wagner, "Will," Dade County, filed December 4, 1901.

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