

Embry family murdered in 1881

By Jerry Long
c.2025



Courier-Journal, Louisville, KY, 13 November 1971, p.1B:



ONLY A few scattered foundation stone remain to show that a house once stood there on the gentle rise in what now is a large pasture about two miles off KY 70 In northern Butler County.

And only a badly-weathered gravestone, now toppled from its base, offers evidence that eight persons are buried in a common grave at the site of the house.

The names on the stone are almost indistinguishable today, but they provide mute testimony to the crime, one of the most savage in Kentucky history, that took place there more than 90 years ago.

For on the night of Jan. 2, 1881, while the family of 10 slept within, the house was set fire to by vandals looking for gold coins. Wiley Embry, the father, and seven of his eight children burned to death. Only the mother and one child escaped. The house was destroyed and the next day neighbors raked up the ashes and buried them in a single grave in the still-smoldering ruins.

The gravestone lists the names as Wiley S., Golson, Julen, William P., Mahala J., Bedford, Seamore and Morgan. No details are given, but by splicing out the folklore that surrounds the incident with a few solid facts, this grisly tale emerges:

It was commonly believed locally that Wiley Embry kept bags of gold coins hanging from the walls of the house. During the night of Jan. 2, robbers slipped up to the house, anesthetized the sleeping family by blowing chloroform through the key holes, stole the coins and then set fire to the place to destroy all evidence, Mrs. Wiley was able to escape with a younger child, Josie, before the blazing house collapsed, trapping the eight victims inside.

The law being far away and detection methods primitive in those days, no arrests ever were made for the mass murder. According to one old wives tales years later a man who lived nearby confessed on his death bed that he and two others had committed the crime.

Officially, however, the case remains unsolved to this day.



Kentucky Explorer, Jackson, KY, November 2009, pp.31-32:

The Embry Family Died Ghastly Deaths In Butler Co. In 1881

*Single Gravestone In Nearly Forgotten Cemetery
Marks The Burial Site Of A Father And Seven Of His Children*

By Bobby Anderson – 2009

A single gravestone in a nearly-forgotten cemetery in rural Butler County, Kentucky, is the bookmark in time which recalls one of the most gruesome tragedies ever perpetrated in this county.

In the Embry family cemetery near Renfrow in Butler County's second district lies the remains of Wiley S. Embry, then 50, and seven other members of his family, all victims of outrageous premeditated murders and arson on January 28, 1881.

Buried with the father were seven of his children: Golsen, Julen N., William P., Mahala J., Bedford, Seamarl [sic], and Margon [sic]; ranging in ages from 25 years old, to the youngest who was only seven. They all had been brutally murdered late in the night by a group of intruders, or they died in the arson-related fire which consumed their home.

The incident was brought to light when the census of all Butler County cemeteries was taken in 1975 by the Butler County Historical Society. When Ruth Duke tabulated the census for the Embry family cemetery, she had forethought enough to include a note of explanation which reads:

"This family was killed by an intruder, who set fire to the house after the mass murder. Two members of the family, the wife of Wiley S. (Mary) and mother of the children, plus one of the children, Josephine, escaped unharmed." (The number of children varies in resources.)

But for the natural curiosity and the tenacious research by one of the descendants of a survivor of this massacre, the story might have ended here.

Shirley Ann Whittinghill Oberhausen, the descendant referred to above, who now lives in Russellville, Logan County, Kentucky, was researching another branch of her family and was thumbing through old newspaper files when the name "Wiley S. Embry" caught her attention. Reading further she deduced that this was the same Wiley S. Embry who was her forefather, and also the same person who had been a victim in the 1881 murders in Butler County. Up to this point in time the saga of the Embry murders had been only family-related tales handed down from generation to generation in her family, as well as for other descendants in other branches of the Embry family.

Now she had black and white proof of the tragedy from the fading pages of at least two newspapers printed in the area at the time the event occurred. She also had names of those allegedly responsible for the crime and why.

In the Owensboro, Kentucky, daily newspaper, dated in January of 1881, the following account of the Embry murders appeared over the by-line of J. T. Neal:

"Caneyville, Ky. - The saddest affair about which we have ever been called upon to write happened in Butler County, Kentucky, 14 miles south of Caneyville on a Friday night at the residence of Mr. Wiley Embry, when the bodies of himself and seven children were totally

consumed by fire. The family consisted of Mr. Embry, his wife and ten children. His wife and three children are all that are left to tell of the mournful calamity.

"At the time the building took fire the whole family were asleep. At the early hour of eight o'clock in the night the neighbors discovered the light at a distance and hastened to the rescue, but alas, too late to save property or life. The scene was a pitiful one to behold. Mrs. Embry was the first to awaken and called to her husband, who sprang out of bed and ran to the stair door to call to those upstairs but the roof was falling in, and he perished at the foot of the stairs. In the meantime, Mrs. Embry and a grown-up daughter escaped with a small child each.

The rooms were so full of flames the rest of the family perished in them. The remains of Mr. Embry were found the next morning at the place where the stair door once was. Three of the sons who were burned were almost grown; one was 16, one 18, and the other 19. The whole country is wild with excitement and theories. Some suppose the family were chloroformed and killed and the house set on fire, but these are only surmises.

"By hard work and economy, Mr. Embry had some money which he had laid up. Only a small portion of it was gold and silver, some of which was found. Still it is not known by the wife whether he had it in the house. She thinks, however, he had as much as \$1,000 in all, some of which were coins. Ten dollars in silver belonging to one of the boys was found melted.

"Mr. Embry was a hardworking religious man and one of the best citizens in that section. What must be the anguish of the heart-stricken wife and mother, and the many relatives, none can imagine. Such a horrible affair has never occurred in that county, and we hope it never may again.

"The remains of the unfortunate ones were gathered together Saturday and interred in one coffin.

"Later: Since writing the above, we have been informed that three men were seen running away from the fire, and it is thought the terrible affair was the act of an incendiary. Parties are suspected. Mr. Embry's grown-up daughter knew the money to be in the house and the amount to be about \$1,000. No more molten coins have been recovered."

(NOTE: Some of the information printed in these stories may not be in accord with later findings. What was reported then as facts could later turn out to be no more than community hearsay.)

The following is from a later edition of the *Hartford (Ky.) Herald*.

"An outrage too horrible to call to mind happened near Caneyville on January 28, 1881, by which Wiley Embry and six (according to cemetery records and other data, seven children in all perished in the fire) children were burned to death. We have just learned that a deathbed confession has brought out the perpetrators. Dr. James M. Brandon of Caneyville, on his deathbed confessed that he and John Whittinghill and Bill Taylor Whittinghill, sons of Remus Whittinghill, did the deed. Brandon said they took a syringe and threw chloroform through the key holes into different rooms and waited until it caused a deep sleep, then they went in and robbed the house, getting \$1,000 in money.

"They then set the house on fire in several places and ran off.

"Mrs. Embry and three children escaped from the fire, and Mr. Embry and seven children, including three sons, almost grown, perished in the flames.

"The parties had been suspected for some time. Bill Taylor's wife took a \$100 bill to Moorman's store to get it changed and Mr. Whittinghill was known to be scarce of money. Brandon married a sister of the Whittinghills. We understand that Brandon is dead, and the Whittinghills have fled." (The faded text of the old newspaper made it impossible to read the remainder of this article.)

An article from the February 24, 1881, edition of the *Messenger-Examiner* (possibly in Owensboro, Daviess County, Kentucky) reported as follows:

"Dr. Jas. M. Brandon, brother-in-law to the Whittinghills, on his deathbed admits that he, John, and Bill Taylor Whittinghill, brothers and sons of Remus, were the murderers."

But then, in a later article in an unidentified publication, under caption, *Green River Region*, Dr. Brandon recanted his alleged deathbed confession. That article reads:

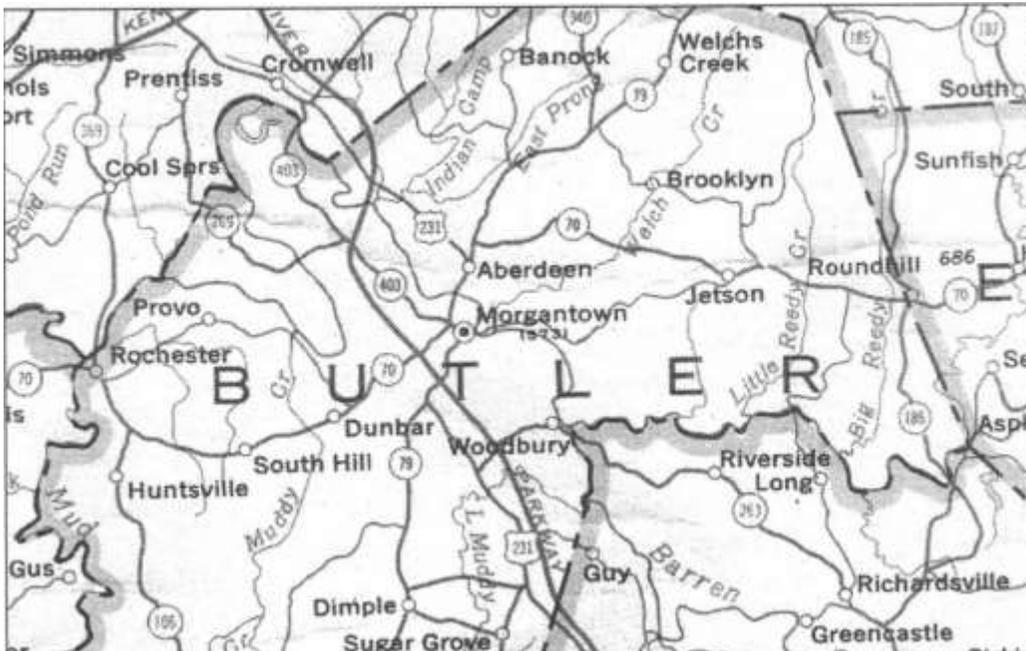
"The friends of Dr. Brandon of Caneyville deny the report of his deathbed confession of complicity in the burning of the Embry family. Dr. Brandon is not dead, but is recovering from a serious illness. Almost the whole community denounces the report in the *Hartford Herald*."

Thus the saga of the Embry family murders ran the gamut from obscurity to a fever pitch in the alleged confession of Dr. James Brandon, and back into obscurity with the back-to-life and denial of the confession of Dr. Brandon. No other records have been uncovered to give closure to this story of Butler County's most infamous tragedy.

Many who read some of the facts in the book *Bloody Muddy* (Anderson and McDowell Publications), especially those of the same Embry family, have stated that they had heard this family story told over and over, not knowing if the stories were family facts or fiction, until they read those early and limited facts in that book.

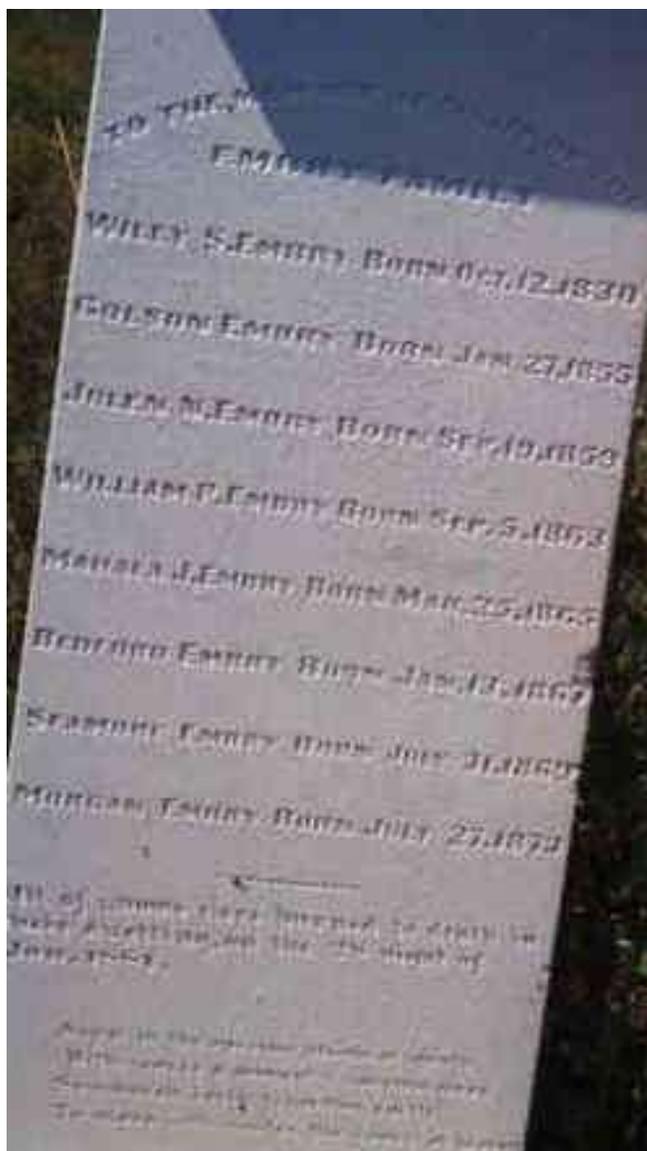
As one caller put it, "I had heard the tales of that tragedy told at family gatherings all my life, but never realized until now that they were true. It really happened."

[Bobby Anderson, 7965 Ridgewood Road, Goodlettsville, TN 37072, shares this article with our readers. He is a native of Muhlenberg County, Kentucky, and is a semiretired author an newspaper editor/publisher.



Wiley S. and Mary Embry, along with their children, lived 14 miles south of Caneyville in Butler County, Kentucky. Wiley and seven of his children met their demise during a house fire in January 1881.





Grave marker in the Lawson Embry Cemetery, Brooklyn, Butler County, KY, for Wiley S. Embry and his seven children, who perished in a fire on 28 January 1881.



Hartford Herald, Hartford, KY, Wednesday, 2 February 1881, p.3:

**HORRIBLE DEATH
Of a Father and Seven Children by Fire.**

CANEYVILLE, Ky., Jan. 31, 1881. The saddest affair we have ever, been called upon to write happened in Butler county, 14 miles south of this place, on Friday night of last week. The residence of Mr. Wiley Embrey, with the bodies of himself and seven children, between the ages

of four and twenty years, were totally consumed by fire. The family consisted of Mr. Embrey, his wife and ten children – his wife and three of the children being all that are left to tell the mournful calamity.

At the time the building took fire the whole family was asleep. At the early hour of 8 o'clock in the night the neighbors discovered the light at a distance and hastened to the rescue, but alas! too late to save property or life.

The scene was a pitiful one indeed to behold. Mrs. Embrey was the first to awake and called to her husband, who sprang out of bed and ran to the stair door to call to those up stairs, but then the roof was falling in and he perished at the foot of the stairs, In the mean time Mrs. Embrey and a grown-up daughter escaped with a small child each. The rooms were so full of flames and smoke that the rest of the family perished in them. The remains of Mr. Embrey were found the next morning at the place where the stair door was. Three of the sons who were burned were almost grown; one was sixteen, one eighteen, and the other nineteen. The whole country is wild with excitement and theories, Some suppose the family was chloroformed and robbed and the house set on fire. But these are only surmises.

Mr. Embrey had some money which he had laid up by hard work and economy. Only a small portion of it was gold and silver, none of which was found. Still it is not known by his wife whether he had it in the house. She thinks, however, he had as much as \$1,000 in all, only \$100 of which was coin, \$10, silver, belonging to one of boys, was found melted.

Mr. Embrey was a hard-working man, a religious man, and one of the best citizens in that section. What must be the anguish of the heart-stricken wife and mother, and his many relatives none can imagine. Such a horrible affair has never before occurred in that county, and we hope it never may again.

The remains of the unfortunate ones were gathered together Saturday and interred in one coffin.

LATER. – Since writing the above we have been informed that three men were seen running away from the fire, and it is thought the terrible affair was the act of an incendiary. Parties are suspected. Mr. Embrey's grown-up daughter knew the money to be in the house and the amount to be about \$1,000. No more molten coin has been discovered. J. T. NEAL



Hartford Herald, Hartford, KY, Wednesday, 22 February 1882, p.3:

Fiends Inhuman.

An outrage too horrible almost to call to mind happened near Caneyville, January 28th, 1881, by which Wiley Embry and six children were burned to death. We have just learned that a death bed confession has brought out the perpetrators. Dr. Jas. N. Brandon, of Caneyville, on his deathbed confessed that he and John Whittinghill and Bill Taylor Whittinghill, sons of Remus Whittinghill did the deed. Brandon said that they took a syringe and threw chloroform through the key-holes into the different rooms, and waited till it caused a deep sleep, then went in and robbed the house, getting \$1,600 in money. They then set the house on fire in several places and ran off. Mrs. Embry and three children escaped from the fire, and Mr. Embry and six children, including three sons almost grown, perished in the flames. Oh God, what a crime! The parties have been suspected for some time. Bill Taylor Whittinghill's wife took a \$100 bill to Moorman's store to get

it changed, and as Whittinghill was known to be scarce of money it excited suspicion. Brandon married a sister of the Whittinghills. We understand that Brandon is dead and the Whittinghills have fled. This is the information as received. It may not be exactly correct in detail, but the substance is.



Hartford Herald, Hartford, KY, Wednesday, 1 March 1882, p.2:

The Embrey Tragedy.

In the last issue of the HERAD publicity was given to the substance of a report of a confession made by Dr. James N. Brandon, of Caneyville, to the effect that he and John Whittinghill and Bill Taylor Whittinghill were the actors in the horrible crime of robbing Wiley Embrey and burning his house, by which Embrey and six of his family were burned to death. At the time the Herald was issued we had been cut off from any communication in the direction of Caneyville for a day or so, and having received information from various sources, in substance as published, and not having heard that the confession was denied, we gave publicity to it. Thursday morning we learned that Mr. Frank Turpin, of Beaver Dam, a brother-in-law to Dr. Brandon had telephoned to Hartford that the report was false in toto. Thursday evening we received a letter from Mr. Turpin to the same effect. Friday, as we passed through Beaver Dam on our way to Louisville, Mr. Turpin handed a statement from Dr. R. W. Brandon, father of Dr. J. N. Brandon, denouncing the whole report as infamously false, also a statement of a large number of citizens of Caneyville, expressing a disbelief in the report that a confession had been made. Mr. Turpin requested that these statements be published in the HERALD. We took the statements and went to the *Courier-Journal* office and procured their insertion together with some explanatory remarks in Saturday's *Courier-Journal*. The statements were as follows:

STATEMENT.

"An article headed 'Fiends Inhuman,' which appeared in the Hartford HERALD, February 22, 1882, caps the climax of all base inhumanity that has ever been perpetrated in the Green river country. The report of the confession of Dr. J. N. Brandon in regard to the Embry tragedy is known to be one of the most base and damnable falsehoods ever proclaimed by tongue or pen, and the brain in which it was hatched must have been taken possession of by the devil himself in order to originate such a base calumny. Words can not express the depths of degradation to which such a person ought to be assigned. Jim is not dead, but improving, and hopes to see that animal, for I am satisfied that he is a beast and does not walk erect like a man. Jim has been bed-ridden for three months, but we think his improvement is permanent. We have seen no one that credits the report for a moment. Annexed we give statement of Caneyville citizens and nurses.

"R. W. BRANDON,
for J. N. BRANDON."

STATEMENT OF CITIZENS.

This is to certify that we have been attendants at the house of Dr. R. W. Brandon during the illness of Dr. J. N. Brandon and met some of the family daily, and that such confession of the said Brandon as he and the Whittinghills being the actors in the Embry tragedy was unheard of until a few days back (say until last Saturday,) when brought here from other neighborhoods, and there is no one here that believes such report.

W. H. Smith, Harvey Campbell, J. R. Bond, Thomas M. Bond, Amanda C. Bond, M. J. Stith, Sallie Tilford, Sarah Tilford, James Coughing, James T. Tilford, M. D. Deweese, D. P. Bratcher, H. A. Bratcher, Emily Bratcher, C. F. Kennedy, J. M. Whitten, Patrick Hickey, Wm. Probus, Hartford Garey, G. W. Worley, W. H. Barnes, Samuel Kennedy, A. L. Blain, Addie May, W. H. Brown, Emma A. Brown, Mary A. Kennedy, A. A. Patterson, Lawson Miller, J. R. Duggin, F. Fentress, J. T. Neal, J. N. Eskridge, Charles L. Young, H. N. Eskridge, J. A. Bratcher, Cicero Wilson; Henry Layman, Hardin Wilson, Ethel Anderson, Joseph Oler, J. T. Hand, Arthur Garey, Huldah Potter, Geo. S. McCorkle, T. J. Board, Mrs. T. J. Board, J. B. Pirtle, Mrs. H. Layman, J. W. Coughing, Wm. T. Carroll, one of the nurses, J. A. Whitten, one of the nurses, Lucy N. Brandon, of the nurses, J. M. Lawrence, boarder in the family, Thos. Tilford, one of the nurses, family."

Previous to its publication in the HERALD, the report was in circulation over large portions of Grayson, Butler and Ohio counties, but our publication no doubt gave the report a more extensive circulation, and for that reason we have given all the publicity in our power to the denial. We trust the whole report of confession is wholly without foundation, and the parties named in the report entirely innocent of the inhuman crime. We do hope that Dr. Brandon may be fully restored to health, for we regret to see a man snatched away prematurely at any time, under any circumstances, but now we still have a greater reason to wish the Doctor's recovery, because, if innocent, we desire to see him erase the foul blot from his character, and if guilty, he ought to live to be convicted and punished as such a damnable crime deserves. We know nothing personally of the guilt or innocence, or whether a confession was made or not, but it seems impossible that a confession could have been made as reported, and so many of the friends neighbors and attendants be entirely ignorant of the fact. It does not seem possible that it could have been suppressed or kept from the nurses, attending him while sick, and it is surely a falsehood concocted and set afloat by some vile enemy. If any of our exchanges have copied the item from the HERALD of last week, we ask them to please copy the denial also.



Hartford Herald, Hartford, KY, Wednesday, 8 March 1882, p.2:

Dr. Brandon's Dental.

CANEYVILLE, KY., March 1, 1882.

To All Whom it May Concern:

As it has been currently reported that I was connected with the burning and robbing of the Embrey family. and supposing that it is generally known that I had been represented as making a confession of the same, I now, being in a low state of health, and in view of the prospects of the future, state positively that I never had any connection with the Embrey tragedy, nor ever made any confession in regard to the matter; never thought of such thing, and would say that the editor or paper that would circulate or give credit or support to such a charge is unfit to hold the confidence of the community in which he lives, and ought to be anathematized by all good citizens.

Given under my hand Feb. 28, 1882.

JAMES N. BRANDON, M. D.



Hartford Herald, Hartford, KY, Wednesday, 29 March 1882, p.2:

The Brandon Tragedy.

I do hereby certify to the best of my recollection that William T. Whittinghill's wife did not bring to my store a \$100 bill to have changed as stated in the Hartford HERALD, this March.

Ed. T. Moorman.

This is to certify that I did not state publicly that the Whittinghills would steal anything, from a nickel up to a money drawer.

J. M. Johnson.

of Fordsville, Ohio county, Ky.

We, the undersigned petitioners, do hereby state that the Whittinghills are and have been at home in face of all the reports in circulation about them having fled the country. We are their neighbors and know positively that they are at home: D. M. Matthews, J. C. Matthews, R. H. Basham, H. F. Matthews, J. H. Mason. R. Milam. J. M. Sharlotte, Allen Burton, Melvin Simmons, F. Burton.

In the report given with regard to the Embry tragedy, in the Hartford HERALD, he, the HERALD man, concludes by saying the substance is true. Now, I would say that there is more falsehood contained in the HERALD article than ever was published before in an article of the same length. First, the statement that Brandon made a confession is false, that Brandon is dead falsehood second. Brandon still lives with prospects of recovery. Falsehood third, that Brandon confessed to throwing chloroform through the key holes. There was a room down stairs and one up stairs, it stated that what gave rise to the suspicion of the parties was that Whittinghill's wife went to Moorman's store to purchase some small articles and threw down a one hundred dollar bill to get changed, when the fact is she never took a hundred dollar bill to Moorman's store and as proof of same you will read the appended certificate of said Moorman. Fifth, that the Whittinghills had fled the country, when they have been at home all the time. Now, the HERALD man would do us a great kindness to give us some of the reliable authors. It is a most heinous crime if perpetrated by any set of individuals, but to charge and circulate it on innocent parties is equally as monstrous as the crime itself.

WILLIAM TAYLOR WHITTINGHILL,
JOHN D. WHITTINGHILL.

On the 22d of February the *Herald* published the report of Dr. J. N. Brandon's confession, which had been widely circulated for several days previously, but the above denial from the Whittinghills was never published until March 17th, more than a month after the report was first circulated, and 23 days after it was published in the *Herald*. If they are wholly innocent why did they delay making their denial for so long? They publish Mr. Ed. T. Moorman's certificate, that to the best of his recollection Wm. T. Whittinghill's wife did not bring a \$100 bill to his store to get changed, but he does not state positively. Why did they not get him to state that neither of them nor Wm. T. Whittinghill's wife ever got a \$100 bill or a large bill changed by him? He may have changed a \$100 bill for John D. or Wm. T., or a \$50 bill or so for either of them or the wife of Wm. T. Whittinghill, so far as we know or learn from said certificate. What do they mean by publishing J. M. Johnson's certificate? The *Herald* never charged that J. M. Johnson said publicly that the Whittinghills would steal anything from a nickel up to a money drawer. Neither of the

editors ever said, wrote or certified to such a thing. We learn, however, from Mr. Johnson that a paper was presented to him by Remus Whittinghill, father of Wm. T. and John. D. purporting to be a statement from the editor of the *Herald*, certifying that we had heard him (Johnson,) speak thus of the Whittinghills. We never gave the Whittinghills nor any one else such a paper or certificate, or paper of any kind; in fact, have not seen them for a long time, and any such a paper they may have is a forgery, so far as it purports to be from us or written or sanctioned by us. We heard some years ago of Mr. Johnson losing a cash drawer with nickels and probably other money in it, and understood that the Whittinghills were in Fordsville the night the money drawer was missing, and in company with some other fellows were at Johnson's store, and also heard that suspicion attached to them, but we never spoke of it publicly, privately or through the paper, and never spoke of anything Johnson said about it. By the way, we would like to know why the Whittinghills did not publish the whole of the certificate they got from Johnson. Why did they publish only a garbled extract, leaving the bulk of it out? Maybe they bit off more than they could "chaw." when they got that certificate.

The ten *petitioners* say the Whittinghills have been at home all the time and we have no reason to dispute it. They say "the *Herald* man concludes by saying the substance is true." We did no such thing. We referred to the Embry tragedy, and added: "We have learned that a death-bed confession has brought out the perpetrators." We then gave the substance of the report as it came to us. We heard on the 21st, day before publication, that Brandon was dead, and that the Whittinghills had fled. We then added: "We understand that Brandon is dead, &c." We concluded thus. "This is the information received. It may not be exactly correct in detail, but the substance is". We no where and at no time said the report was true, and do not now say so. We gave the report according to the information received: correct in substance, but did not attempt to give the whole report in detail as we had heard it. We did what we considered to be our duty at the time. The report had been widely circulated at the time we published it. If true that a confession had been made, or the parties were in any way connected with the crime the public had a right to know it. If the parties were innocent, they had a right to know what was being widely circulated concerning them, and we claim that we did them a great favor, for we informed them of the substance of the report and placed it in a tangible shape to deny. We had heard of no denial at the time we published the report or would have also given the denial. So soon as we heard of the denial we used all reasonable efforts to give publicity to that denial; such efforts, too, as would have been satisfactory to gentlemen and honorable men, but did not seem to satisfy the Whittinghills or Dr. R. W. Brandon, father of Dr. J. N. Brandon.

The blustering, bullying conduct of Dr. Brandon has caused quite a number who at first believed the report false, to suspicion that there is some truth in it, and that Dr. Brandon knows it. Not long since a representative of this paper was in Caneyville on business and met Mr. John Whitten, an old friend, who proffered to aid him in getting subscribers. Dr. Brandon heard of this and assaulted and choked Mr. Whitten for it. We got the subscribers all the same.

Dr. Brandon tried to get up a difficulty with Captain Sandusky, of Central City, for showing the paper to someone. It seems if we were charged with felony, and were innocent of it, we would court the fullest investigation. If these parties are innocent of any connection with the Embrey crime, the way to convince the public of it is not by trying to smother it out and bullying the people into silence, but by a full investigation. Let them join in a letter to the officers of Butler county asking them to ferret the matter out. Let them write to the Circuit Judge and Commonwealth's Attorney of that district and ask for an exhaustive effort to discover who the perpetrators are. Let them write to the next Grand Jury of Butler county and ask that they take the matter in hand and

spare no pains to find out who the inhuman fiends are who burned up the Embrey family. In this way they may convince the public that they are innocent, but they will never do it by the course they have been pursuing.

The Whittinghills in their card say: "There was a down stairs room and one up stairs." From this we conclude they must have known something about Embrey's premises. It will be in order now for them to explain how they, living in Breckenridge county, knew anything of the kind of a house Embrey had living 20 to 25 miles distant in Butler county.

Dr. Brandon has circulated it far and wide that he has instituted suit against us for \$20,000, and we have been asked more than a hundred times concerning it. We have to say that we have not been officially advised of any suit. We have done nothing to be sued for and have no regrets for anything we have done and apology to make. We never manufactured or started the report, and never published it till after it was widely circulated, have never said it was true in any particular, and have no fears of a suit or the results of it if one should be brought.



Hartford Herald, Hartford, KY, Wednesday, 26 April 1882, p.2:

BRNDON BRAYS

About as Loud and Logical as that other Long-eared Animal.

I find an article in the Hartford HERALD, an appendix to the Brandon tragedy, in which there are many statements that are not founded on facts but fictitious ideas. In his second issue he published that in order to place the report in a tangible shape for a man who was dead and placed under the sod, to deny, as he states in his first article. Shame! on an editor who would make and circulate a report on a man who was at that time not capable of defending himself. But at present I am happy to inform the HERALD man that I am capable of defending myself intellectually and physically, and ready to do so at any moment. Now, the HERALD man states that he was in Fordsville on the 16th, 17th and 18th of February. He says the people in Fordsville county have no doubt as to the truthfulness of the statement, with this exception, the people generally doubt Brandon being implicated in the matter. Now HERALD man, why did you in the face of man, and in the presence of your God, make and circulate such a hellish lie on me, in the face of those two reports which you received on the 16th, 17th and 15th and published on the 22nd of February? Did you do this in order to injure the dead, or did you do it in order to cast a reflection upon my wife and child, to place a stain upon their characters, to burden them through life Or did you do it to injure old Dr. Brandon and cause him to choke your friend Whitten and insult Sandusky? Dr. Brandon choked Whitten because he stated we got the subscribers all the same, and if the HERALD man don't like that, he (Dr. Brandon can carve him a chip off' the same block. Sandusky isn't worthy of notice. He clipped from the HERALD the article and read it promiscuously around. Virgil Porter, a friend, heard him and disputed the report, when Sandusky replied, " I always knew Jim Brandon was as mean as hell," and then denied it to Dr. Brandon, that is why he insulted him. I suppose the Captain thinks I am so mean because I tried a couple of times to collect a little cost off of him – but I failed all the same. If Mr. Barrett was your representative, your paper was poorly represented, for he denied being connected with your paper in any way. I thought he was acting as a sign for some bar-room at this place. Now, Mr. HERALD man, it is your place to go to the officials of Butler county and have this matter ferreted out. You made the ungrounded charge

against me, go to the last Grand Jury of Butler county and see if it hasn't been ferreted out, go to Wiley Embrey's wife and his only brother living, who states there was only \$42 in the house at the time of the burning, and who also states the house caught fire accidentally, and there was \$12 in coin which was found melted after the burning.

Now, Mr. HERALD man, any man who would make and keep up such a report, or any man in the face of your articles, who would believe it from your own statements, is a low down liar, beneath the notice of a gentleman, and cannot walk up and look an honest man in the face, and an honest man is what I profess to be.

J. N. BRANDON.

HOWEY'S LETTER.

HARTFORD, KY., Feb. 26th, '82.

Mr. Van. B. Nelson:

SIR. – Your letter received last night, and in reply will say that I have just had a talk with the editor of the HERALD. He told me that he was in the Fordsville country on the 16, 17 and 18th of this month, and while there, Dr. Meador brought the news from Caneyville in regard to the confession. He states that Meador did not tell him but told others. The best citizens in Fordsville did not doubt the truthfulness of the statement, as the Whittinghills had been suspected of something. The first cause of suspicion originated from Whittinghill's wife (who is very poor) going to a store, a few days after the robbery, and after making some little purchases, she threw down a \$100 bill for change; the merchant at once suspected something wrong. I am reliably informed that the Whittinghill's, are among the worst characters on record and have been accused of stealing various things, from five cents up to a money drawer. I understand that Mr. Johnson, of Fordsville, asserts publicly, that they stole his money-drawer, and carried it a few hundred yards and emptied it of its contents. One man remarks they are devils out of hell and are capable of doing anything imaginable. The editor of the HERALD says the people in the Fordsville country have no doubt as to the truthfulness of the statement, with this exception, the people generally doubt Brandon's being implicated in this matter. I am of the opinion that the Whittinghills are in close quarters. The crime was a terrible one, and it is to be hoped, for the sake of his friends and relatives, if nothing else, that Dr. Brandon is innocent. It hardly looks reasonable that a man can in cold blood set fire to and burn a house full of innocent and helpless people. Van, you asked me for this information, and have given it to the best, of my knowledge, and hope I have said nothing to in any way wound your feelings.

S. F. Howey.

In the above he says: "Shame on an editor who would make and circulate a report on a man who was at the time not capable of defending himself." Again he says: Now Mr. HERALD man, any man who would make and keep up such a report, or any man who in the face of your articles who would believe it from your statements, is a low down liar beneath the notice of a gentleman, etc.

We think Brandon for once is partly correct. We think it is shameful for any editor or any man to make and circulate or make and keep up a false or slanderous, report, and such an one, deserves censure and the punishment prescribed by law should be meted out to him.

The shoe however does not fit us so we will not wear it, nor take any of the denunciation to ourselves, as we have never made a false or slanderous report about anybody, and never have knowingly circulated or kept up false or slanderous reports.

So anxious was Brandon to whitewash himself, and show us to be inconsistent that he publishes a letter written by S. F. Howey of this place to Mr. V. B. Nelson of Vine Grove. The letter was written by Mr. Howey in confidence, and was sent by Mr. Nelson to Dr. R. W. Brandon

as a private paper to show to Dr. B. the opinion entertained of the Whittinghill boys by Ohio county people, and was published without the consent or knowledge of either Howey or Nelson.

Mr. Nelson who is a brother-in-law to Brandon publishes the following card.

VINE GROVE, KY.

Editor Sunbeam:

In your fast week's issue, I noticed a letter which was written to me by S. F. Howey, of Hartford. In justice to Mr. Howey I will say that this letter was written at my solicitation, and was published in your paper without my knowledge or consent, neither was it intended for publication when written by Mr. Howey. Respt. VAN. B. NELSON.

It is ungentlemanly, and very discourteous to publish a private letter without consent, but not only did Brandon violate the rules of politeness, and abuse the confidence, Mr. Nelson reposed in his father-in-law, but either by his fault or that of the publisher of the *Sunbeam* the letter is made to convey a different meaning from that intended.

In proof of this we give a statement from Mr. Howey himself:

MR. HOWEY'S STATEMENT.
HARTFORD, KY., April 18th, '82.

In justice to the editor of the HERALD, I feel it my duty to say that the letter which appeared in the last issue of the Sunbeam over my signature addressed to Mr. V. B. Nelson of Vine Grove was incorrectly punctuated. It was written hurriedly, and at the urgent request of Mr. Nelson, who is a friend of mine.

The sentences under consideration should read "The editor of the HERALD says the people in the Fordsville country have no doubt as truthfulness of the statement." With this exception, the people generally doubt Brandon's being implicated in the matter. Any man with common sense can see that the two sentences are entirely disconnected. The first being a quotation from the editor, while the second is an expression of my own. I wish it understood that I bear no ill-will toward the parties. Brandon is no more to me than the Whittinghill's. The letter was strictly confidential, and could not have injured anyone. The letter was handed to Dr. Brandon, who afterwards had it published without the knowledge or consent of either Mr. Nelson or myself. I regret nothing I have written about the matter as it was at the solicitation of a friend (Mr. Nelson), who, I am sure, would do as much for me. Hoping my name will not again be used in connection with the affair,

I am, Very Respectfully,
S. F. Howey.

We never said, that with the exception of the people of Fordsville, the people generally doubted Brandon's being implicated. We could not make such a statement truthfully for all the expressions of opinion, save one, that we have heard, was, that he in some way was implicated. The letter of Mr. Howey was written as will be seen just four days after the report was first published, and just after Brandon's denial had been published.

Brandon is very denunciatory of a person who will make, circulate or keep up a false or slanderous report. The Whittinghills claim to be as innocent of the crime as Brandon, and have published a card to that effect and after their published denial and right following his own denunciation of a man or editor, who would circulate and keep up such a report, he strains a point, and without the knowledge or consent of the writer or the person addressed. publishes Howey's letter, which states that his brothers-in-laws, the *Whittinghills*, are among the worst characters on record, will steal and are devils out of hell, and capable of doing anything imaginable.

Brandon informs as that he is able to defend himself intellectually, but thus denounces *himself as a low down liar, beneath the notice of u gentleman, and cannot look an honest man in the face!* Well, as he has shown himself to be all this, we will accept his statement as true, and expect the public generally will concede the truth of it.

Brandon inquires if we publish the report in order to cast a reflection upon his wife and child, to place a stain upon their character, to burden them through life. We will answer his question by asking one; "Did you publish the Howey letter, charging the Whittinghills with being thieves, devils out of hell and capable of anything" to cast a reflection upon your wife, their sister, upon your child, their niece, and place a stain upon their characters, to burden them through life and that, too, after the Whittinghills had published a card denying any connection with the crime. When we published the report we knew of no denial, but he publishes Howey's letter, after their published denial. Brandon is stopped from denouncing us as his conduct toward the brothers of his wife, and the uncles of his child is far worse than he himself charges us with having done.

Captain Sandusky is too well and favorably known to be injured by anything Jim Brandon could say of him, and needs no defense from such an attack. Our agent and local editor Mr. L. Barrett visited Caneyville, but did not deny that he represented the HERALD. He probably said he was no longer one of the proprietors or owners, and though Brandon says he was a poor representative, he increased the subscription list of the HERALD at that place about 200 percent. Jim Brandon never saw our agent, and how does he know what he said or how he looked. He guessed at it. The disinterested, respectable citizens of the place know how he conducted and represented himself, and his success satisfied us.

In conclusion we will state that we heard this report from various sources and persons every one of whom believed it to be true, and heard no denial, and on the 21st of February we heard Brandon was dead, and the Whittinghills had left, so we published it believing it was proper and right and our duty as journalists to do so, for if true, the public had right to know it, if false the a accused had a right to know what was being widely circulated and generally believed about them and in either event we did right and have no regrets for what we did, no apology to offer and no favors to ask. When denied, without stopping to ascertain whether true or false we gave the denial all the publicity in our power so as to give them the full benefit of it, and did enough to satisfy gentlemen, honorable men. or innocent men, but it seems not to have satisfied Brandon or the Whittinghills for they have kept writing and publishing silly cards abusing us which has kept the matter alive, and more strongly confirmed the public generally in belief of their connection in some way with the crime. When we published their denial and set them right before the public, so far as we could do, we were through and would have stopped, but they saw proper to assail us, and we saw proper to defend our course, and will continue to do so as long as they continue to abuse and denounce us. We have never said the report was true or false, for we do not know. Brandon had as well be notified, that there are two editors and proprietors of the HERALD, each of whom are alike responsible for the conduct of the paper and he might use the term "HERALD men" instead of the singular number. Come again and we have more in store for you.



Hartford Herald, Hartford, KY, Wednesday, 31 May 1882, p.2:

REMUS WHITTINGHILL and three of his sons, Jno. D. Wm. T. and Charles of Breckenridge county, armed themselves recently, and went to the house of James Johnson of their

neighbor hood. Johnson was at home, they went in search and not finding him they got John Charlotte to write a note to Johnson, ordering him to leave the country, threatening him if he did not, and went to the house and gave it to Johnson's wife and told her to give it to Johnson, and told her they knew he was under the bed in the house. It frightened her very much. When Johnson heard of what had transpired he went forthwith and got out a writ for them and had them arrested. They asked for a change of venue from their own district, and the trial was set for last Friday at DeHaven, so we heard. We understand that the reason of the trouble grew out of a report that Johnson had accused John D. of stealing corn. Now this is all just like the connecting of the boys J. D. and W. T. Whittinghill with the Embrey matter. It is the report in circulation as received by us from different sources. We do not know how true it is.



**Tilford Trails, Pearl O. Smith
(Arlington, VA: Weeks Publishers, 1991) pp.131-132:**

Wilbur Baxley went, in March 1990, to the Embry farm in Butler County. He met Mr. Wiley L. Embry, great grandson of Wiley S. Embry, who died in the fire of 1881. Near the site of the house that burned is a monument bearing names of the eight persons who perished in the fire. Mr. Wiley L. Embry made these statements regard-the tragedy:

Dr. Brandon was called to treat a member of the Embry family who was ill. He observed the "pile of money" from which Mr. Embry paid him. The doctor, a Whittinghill, and a man named Brown went at night and robbed Wiley S. Embry. One of Embry's Sons was a fortune teller and, fearing the boy would name them, Dr. Brandon put chloroform through a hole in the door where a chain went through to lock the door from the inside, then set fire to the house.

Those who escaped were Mrs. Wiley S. Embry, Wiley C. Embry, age 10, and Josephine Embry, age 3.



Family of Wiley S. Embry

Wiley S. Embry was born 12 October 1830 in Madison County, KY. A marriage record in the 1852-1861 Kentucky Vital Statistics reports his place of birth as Madison County, KY. He was the son of Golson Embry (21 February 1803 – c1880) & Mary Sublett (15 November 1799 – 8 January 1879), who were married on 3 February 1824 in Garrard County, KY. Golson is listed in the 1830 census of Madison County, KY, 1840, 1850, 1860, 1870 & 1880 censuses of Butler County, KY. Golson's death date in many family trees is given as 28 January 1881. This day, however, may be in error – confused with the date his grandson, Golson Embry (son of Wiley), perished in the fire of 28 January 1881.

Wiley's grandfather, Cader Embry, was born in 1778; removed with his parents to Madison County, KY. He married Frances Sebastian on 23 July 1801 in Madison County, KY. Cader Embry first appears in the Butler County annual tax lists in 1834. His son, Golson, is first listed in 1835. Cader was long a minister of the gospel, and organized the first Christian Church in Butler County;

age of 30 years, 8 months and 22 days on 30 October 1882. He was buried in the Caneyville Cemetery.

William Taylor Whittinghill and John David Whittinghill were sons of Remus George Whittinghill (1817-1897) and Sarah Elizabeth Fentress (1824-1908). Their family was listed in the 1850, 1860, 1870 and 1880 censuses of Breckinridge County, KY. William (“Bill”) was born c1847 and was living in Breckinridge County at the time of the 1910 census. William T. married Paulina Ellen Basham, on 31 March 1870 in Breckinridge County, KY. William & Paulina are buried with his parents in the Whittinghill Cemetery in Ohio County, KY. John David Whittinghill was born 26 August 1857 in Breckinridge County, KY. He died 17 January 1938 in Fulton County, KY, where he was buried in the Cayce Methodist Church Cemetery. He was single.



Family Cemetery where Wiley Embry and his children were buried.

