

Carnton Plantation Museum

A Man, A Book and a Battlefield



BY JILL PETERSON PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF CARNTON PLANTATION

*“This is where you became an American”
... Robert Hicks on the Battle of Franklin
and the American Civil War.*

THE MAN ...Robert Hicks

To tell the story of the Battle of Franklin, Carrie McGavock, *The Widow of the South*, and Carnton Plantation, one must start with Robert Hicks. Author, preservationist, “Tennessean of the Year,” music publisher, collector, partner in B.B. King’s Blues Clubs, all describe what he does. Passionate, inspiring, spiritual, humane, sincere, and humble describe who he is.



Robert Hicks and his dog, Jake.

Born and reared in South Florida, Hicks was always surrounded by books and reading. “Books were a part of every major holiday - giving and receiving.” Hicks likes to say his dad was an eternal optimist with good reasons for his optimism. “We were raised believing that anything is possible.”

A move to Williamson County, Tennessee, in 1974 preceded his settling into “Labor in Vain,” a late eighteenth-century log cabin on the edge of the woods in a hollow near Leiper’s Fork, Tennessee, his home since 1979. “I live in a magical place: my cabin, my community, the green hills of Middle Tennessee, and within my head. The entire world, both within and without, is surrounded by the stories from my father, older relatives, strangers, books, and movies. I was raised surrounded by storytellers. They’ve made the world I live in forever magical and rich, even within the solitude of my cabin walls.”

A music publisher by trade, Hicks is by avocation a preservationist, since 1987 a Director on the Board of Historic Carnton Plantation, where he has done everything from house restoration to hauling out the trash. Three times elected President of the Board, Hicks became painfully familiar with the typical problems facing house museums today – lack of attendance, lack of funding, and lack of resources.

“We did not burden the tax dollar. We saved the city of Franklin \$100,000 a year by allowing them to dump leaves here. I asked the Board to let me bring in the scholars who were working on Mount Vernon and other major house museums to guide and direct us. I told them, ‘I will raise the money if you let them come.’” Hicks sealed his fate with that statement and soon put his mind to work on just how he was going to raise the necessary funds.

“I was sitting in my office on Music Row in Nashville one day, contemplating what would happen after my term, what the future would hold for Carnton if no one stepped up to provide endowment. I realized then that I

Right & Below: The 7th Tennessee Cavalry often hold reenactment events at Carnton Plantation.



“It was, one Confederate soldier said, “... a night where the devil had full possession of the earth.”

needed to tell the story.”

With very little writing experience, and no experience writing historical fiction, Hicks relied on his determination and one other quality. “I expected this to work because I was delusional! Sometimes we need to be driven by our delusion. Nothing we do of real value is easy in this life, but we aren’t going for easy – we are going for rich, rewarding, and meaningful.” Hicks relied on his father’s promises and on how he had lived his entire life up until then, by the adage, “The worst thing you can do is not do it.”

The Widow of the South, the story of Carrie McGavock, Carnton Plantation, and the Battle of Franklin, Tennessee, was published in 2005 after seven years of research, the last two of which included the writing by Robert Hicks, and within one week of its release date landed on the New York Times Bestseller List. Visits to Carnton Plantation are up significantly since the book was published. “I am so grateful for this success,” Hicks relates. “The most rewarding thing is when people come to me with their stories, like the young woman who had lost her seventeen-year-old son. She related to Carrie McGavock when nothing else had helped. How lucky I am to live to see it work.”

The Museum Board of Directors has honored its former President with a resolution calling him, “...the driving force in the restoration and preservation of Historic Carnton Plantation.” For the impact his novel has had on The State of Tennessee, heritage tourism and battlefield preservation, the Nashville Tennessean in 2005 named Robert Hicks, “Tennessean of the Year.”

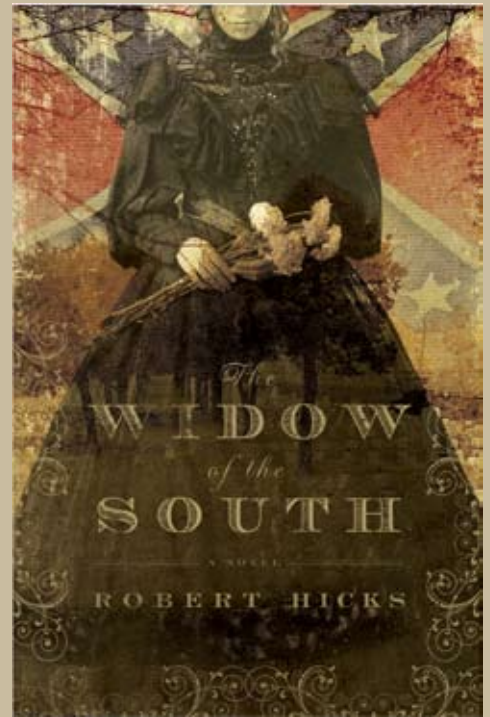
“The old South died during that time and we were reborn as a nation.”

THE BOOK ...*The Widow of the South*, historical fiction

“It is not so much about the five bloodiest hours in the Civil War, but how people survive great calamity and are transformed,” according to author Robert Hicks. He recounts the 1864 Battle of Franklin surrounding Carnton Plantation in a book which reviewers have compared favorably to the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Killer Angels*. The Hicks work transcends the classification, “Civil War novel,” by its historical impact and the far-reaching appeal of its story of compassion, love and redemption.

Carrie McGavock was the mistress of Carnton Plantation, a reclusive woman trying to lead a quiet life after the death of three of her five children. Carrie’s husband John helped supply the Confederate troops with necessities and also worked hard to keep their plantation operating despite the war. On a fateful day in November 1864, her world would change forever. Armies descended upon Franklin, 20,000 Confederates and 20,000 Union troops in full battle array. Within five hours, more than 9,000 men – 7,000 Confederate, 2,000 Union - were killed, wounded, captured or counted missing near Carnton House, some literally in the front yard. It was, one Confederate soldier said, “A night where the devil had full possession of the earth.”

Carnton, Carrie’s home, was commandeered as a Confederate Army Hospital and soon four generals would lie dead on her back porch and hundreds of soldiers would be brought there to suffer, be treated, and die. Because she did everything in her



Above Left: A portrait of Carrie McGavock.

*Above Right: The book cover for **The Widow of the South**.*

Left: Front entry hall of Carnton.

*Right: A view of Carnton Plantation home,
from the front.*

Below: The office of John McGavock.



power to treat them physically and spiritually with respect and love, Carrie soon became known as the “angel of mercy” to the wounded. Husband John in his quiet, ineffectual way simply followed her lead. “Weaving fiction into the facts, Hicks enmeshes Carrie in a personal relationship with one of her patients. Desperately wounded Sgt. Zachariah Cashwell, refused amputation of his leg though keeping it meant certain, agonizing death. When he lapsed unconscious, Carrie instructed the surgeon to amputate. Because each had had paralyzing losses, an intense and healing friendship sprang up between the two, and, though Carrie was ever faithful to John, she cherished Cashwell. Taken as a prisoner of war with all surviving wounded when Union forces returned on December 18, he vanished from Carrie’s life. Caring for the wounded and sick after the battle helped Carrie find her strength and purpose again. She was able to deal with the loss of her own children through writing hundreds of letters home for the wounded soldiers, and letters to parents of the loss of their young sons.

About two hundred Union wounded were left behind in Franklin, as the remnants of the Federal Army marched to Nashville after the battle. The 189 blue-clad dead mingled their blood with that of the enemy, their Confederate brothers, and went to the grave on Southern soil. When Union troops re-entered Franklin on December 18 in pursuit of Lt. Gen. John Bell Hood, many of the wounded, who had been kept alive by Carrie and others, were taken prisoner by the Federal soldiers.

The next Spring, Carrie and John, with the aid of friends, moved and buried the bodies of over fifteen hundred soldiers to a two-acre plot of ground adjacent to their family cemetery. Hicks describes, “As she cared over the dying, she spent the rest of her days caring over the dead.”

Telling the story through flashbacks and memories, Hicks opens it at the end when

Carrie is an old woman, standing among the graves with Mariah, once her slave and now only her friend. They are approached by an old man, clearly a Confederate veteran who has lost a leg, who asks, “Do you have room for one more?” Zachariah Cashwell has come home to join his brothers-in-arms, to the place which holds for him the saddest and the sweetest memories.

Carrie McGavock would later become known as “the Widow of the South, the Keeper of the Dead.” But her fame spread far beyond Tennessee. When Oscar Wilde was touring America in 1882, he asked to visit “...sunny Tennessee to meet the Widow McGavock, the high priestess of dead boys.”

Walt Whitman called the Battle of Franklin, “the defining point in American history.” Robert Hicks might agree, as he believes, “Talking to people about the importance of the American Civil War is paramount, and that it not be forgotten. Immigration lines at our borders are so long because of, simply, the Civil War. Whatever is great about our country was made during the Civil War. The old South died during that time and we were reborn as a nation.”

Hicks continues, “... if you want to know what really matters, come to Carnton and stand on the bloodstained floors, walk through the halls where Carrie McGavock walked with two inches of blood staining the bottom of her skirts, stand in the McGavock cemetery, and see that this is where you became an American.”

THE BATTLEFIELD... Carnton Plantation Museum

Carnton was built in 1826 by former Nashville Mayor Randal McGavock, and became one of the premiere farms in Williamson County, Tennessee. Upon Randal’s death, his son John inherited the farm. John married Carrie Winder in 1848.

After the Battle of Franklin, a staff officer wrote that “the wounded, in hundreds, were brought to (the house) during the battle, and all the night after. And when the noble old house could hold no more, the yard was appropriated until the wounded and dead filled that”



Today the McGavock Confederate Cemetery is hallowed ground, a place for prayers, tears and reverence, the largest privately-owned military cemetery in the nation. Seven hundred eighty Confederate soldiers are positively identified, while about five hundred fifty-eight are officially listed as unknowns. Those who could not be individually identified are marked by the company they fought for, with larger state markers, and, except for Virginia, every state in the Confederacy is represented. The names of the buried and any other information known were entered in a book which is now on display in the plantation museum. Granite headstones replaced the original decaying wooden ones in 1896. Carrie McGavock, the Widow of the South and Keeper of the Dead, lovingly cared for her soldiers and their resting place until her death in 1905.

The McGavock family owned Carnton until 1911 when Susie Lee McGavock, widow of Winder McGavock, sold it. In 1977 the house and ten acres were donated to the Carnton Association, Inc. by Dr. W.D. Sugg. By that time the structure had suffered years of neglect and disrepair. The association has been vital in restoring and maintaining the plantation through tours, gift shop sales, membership, special events, and generous donations.



"Rest well, boys, your work is done."
Kraig McNutt - Local Historian

Right: Formal parlor of Carnton.

Below Right: The Carter House

The historic town of Franklin, Tennessee, is also home to The Carter House, which was at the epicenter of the battle and was commandeered to be used as the Federal Command Post, while the Carter family and two neighboring families hid in the basement. A visitor will find more than a thousand bullet holes on the site, including the barn, which is officially recognized as the most bullet-damaged building that remains standing from the entire Civil War. The third historic home on the battlefield is the Lotz House.



Today, a massive mission is underway to save what remains of the eastern flank of the battlefield at Franklin – the largest remaining undeveloped fragment of the battlefield – and turning it into a public battlefield park. The American Battlefield Protection Program has called this endeavor “the largest battlefield reclamation in North American history.” When finished, the site will incorporate the Lotz and Carter Houses, Carnton Plantation and all of the land between. To date, over six million dollars has been raised toward this effort. Robert Hicks, as founding chairman emeritus of Franklin’s Charge: A Vision and Campaign for the Preservation of Historic Open Space, continues to use his considerable gifts on its behalf as he did so memorably for Carnton Plantation.

