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Ghosts of *Gone with the Wind* Haunt the Wild West

It's the world's most beloved tale of the Old South, but *Gone with the Wind* was just fiction – or so thought historian and author Victoria Wilcox when she set out to restore a Georgia landmark and discovered the true lives behind the classic novel.

“It seems Margaret Mitchell may not have been entirely making things up when she created Scarlett O’Hara and Rhett Butler,” says Wilcox, founding director of Georgia’s Holliday-Dorsey-Fife House Museum and a novelist herself. “Many of her characters bear striking similarities to the stories of her own extended family members. When her father Eugene Mitchell, a noted Atlanta attorney, first read her completed manuscript, he warned her that she was likely to be sued.”

Wilcox came across some of those family stories while working on the preservation plan for the Holliday-Dorsey-Fife House, a white-columned antebellum beauty in Fayetteville, Georgia. “We researched the house itself to recreate the 1851 structure, and researched the families who lived there. The first owner was Dr. John Stiles Holliday who was related to the Fitzgeralds, the family of Margaret Mitchell.”

It was Mitchell’s grandmother Annie Fitzgerald who was rumored to be the model for Scarlett O’Hara. “In fact, Annie once lived at the Holliday House when it was being used for boarding students from the Fayetteville Academy, as Scarlett had lived there in *Gone with the Wind*. And that’s just the start of many similarities between the two Southern belles.”

There are other major characters likely modeled on Mitchell’s family members, including Rhett Butler who shares a name with an Irish nobleman ancestor called Red Butler. “I was doing some Fitzgerald genealogical research and discovered that interesting link,” says Wilcox. “Of course, that may have been just a coincidence and not intentional. But we know that Margaret Mitchell was proud of her Irish roots and her family history, often making trips from Atlanta to visit with elderly relatives in Jonesboro and personally taking care of the family cemetery plot in Fayetteville. She was quoted as saying she’d spent many happy hours with her aunts and uncles, hearing their stories of the Civil War and their Irish ancestors. It’s easy to see where she wove those stories through her novel.”

But while Mitchell, perhaps wary of the lawsuits her father predicted, publicly denied any relationship between her fictional characters and her real family, there was one cousin she not

only modeled a character after, but asked permission of before using her name. Mitchell's heroine, sweet Melanie Hamilton Wilkes, was based on a cousin named Mattie Holliday who became a nun and took the name Sister Melanie. Family histories state that Mitchell was close to this much older cousin and often visited with Sister Melanie at St. Joseph's Infirmary in Atlanta. It was there that she asked Sister Melanie if she would mind having a character named for her. The older woman's reply was as sweet as one would expect of *Gone with the Wind's* Melanie: "Just make her a good person." Years later, when the author's brother Stephens Mitchell was asked if the story about Melanie being named for Sister Melanie were true, he replied, "So far as I know, your information is correct."

But it's the family's surprising link to the Wild West that may be the most interesting story of all: a cousin named John Henry Holliday, namesake nephew of the man who owned the Holliday House. According to family memoirs, the Hollidays often gathered there in the days before the Civil War, and John Henry grew up admiring his uncle's medical work and followed him into the professions, becoming a dentist.

But not just any dentist. John Henry Holliday became one of dentistry's most infamous practitioners: the legendary Doc Holliday of Tombstone, Arizona and the OK Corral shootout.

There's one more twist in this tale of the Old South and the Wild West, namely the old family story that Doc Holliday was in love with his cousin Mattie Holliday, the girl who was the model for Melanie in *Gone with the Wind*. Some members of the family contend that it was their ill-fated love affair that sent him West and her to a convent. "We'll never know for certain, unless we find the love letters that were long rumored to exist," says Wilcox. "But it's amazing to think of the South's greatest love story being linked to one of the West's greatest legends through these family ties."

It's also a perfect subject for another novel, a kind of literary 'cousin' to *Gone with the Wind*. Indeed, this book has already been written. *Southern Son: The Saga of Doc Holliday* by Victoria Wilcox will be released May of 2013 by Knox Robinson Publishing. The historical fiction trilogy begins with *Inheritance*, set in Georgia during the troubled days of Civil War and Reconstruction, and continues in *Gone West* and *The Last Decision* tracing the journey of John Henry Holliday from Southern gentleman to Western legend. "I like to think of it as *The Old South Meets the Wild West*. It's a tale of family and honor and the redeeming power of love," says Wilcox, "and the real meaning of Tara. I think Margaret Mitchell would be pleased."