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Walking through island graveyards can lead to unexpected discoveries. For instance, a quiet stroll through the old Howard cemetery on British Cemetery Road in February of 2003 led to more information than I thought I'd ever want to know about the Canadian Tamarack tree, and just enough to whet my appetite about a fascinating island woman now long dead.

Ocracoke residents of years gone by were familiar with the Tamarack tree. Also known as the Eastern Larch, many English speakers called it the Hackmatack tree. This unusual name derives from the Algonquin word "akemantak" which means "wood used for snowshoes."

Parts of this softwood tree, found primarily in cold, wet, poorly-drained sites in Canada were used by Native Americans for medicines, canoe paddles, snowshoes, and drums. The bark was used to tan hides, smoke fish, and build signal fires. When burning, hackmatack wood produces quite a lot of smoke. It is also prone to popping loudly and throwing out a prodigious number of bright, colorful sparks.

Because the root of the Hackmatack tree grows at a right angle to the trunk, this section of the tree has great strength. Called "tension wood" it is widely used to make "knees" which have a long history of use by builders of wooden ships, to join ribs to deck timbers.

And so it is likely that nineteenth century islanders learned of the Hackmatack wood while building boats, and later, as they salvaged firewood from schooners that wrecked on Ocracoke's beach. Outer Bankers also used lumber from wrecked vessels in the homes they built for themselves on the islands.

[Hackmatack Knee from the Homer & Aliph Howard Home:](#)



I knew virtually nothing about the Hackmatack tree when I spotted the tomb of Jordan Dailey in the second row of markers in the Howard Cemetery. Jordan Dailey, who was born in 1806 and died on the last day of 1843, is one of only a handful from that family who have called Ocracoke home.

Jordan Dailey, 1806 - 1843:



“How did a single Dailey come to be buried in the Howard graveyard?” I wondered. Who exactly was he, and what was his story? Well, that’s something of a puzzle, I discovered.

I learned that Jordan Dailey was a merchant from Swan Quarter who married into the Howard family of Ocracoke around 1840. His wife, Ann Heggart, was the great-great-granddaughter of William Howard, Sr., colonial owner of Ocracoke Island.

There is more to the story than that, however. Years ago the North Carolina government kept records of children born out of wedlock, presumably to aid in inheritance squabbles. A woman named Sarah (Sally) Ballance was listed in these records as mother of a young son born in April or May of 1833. She identified the father as Jordan Dailey.

Sometime after her son was born, and before 1840, Sarah Balance appears to have married a Stanford Jackson. She came to be called “Aunt” even by neighbors and friends. Her nickname was Sally, and as was the custom on the island, she was often referred to by her husband’s name. Hence, “Aunt Sal Stanford.”

By all accounts she was a feisty, independent, no-nonsense, irreverent woman known to speak her mind and take no guff from anyone. She was also flamboyant, being fond of bangles, earrings, and other flashy jewelry.

Existing records indicate that Stanford Jackson had previously married a Sarah Easter on the first day of the new year, 1829. Presumably she died at a young age and Stanford Jackson remarried, this time to Sally Balance. Stanford Jackson is last listed in census records in 1840, so we may assume that he died before 1850.

1850 Census records further indicate that, at 40 years old, Aunt Sal Stanford was head of household, putting her birth date about 1810. That same census lists a 17 year old boy named Thomas living with her. Thomas would have been born in 1833, the same year the Dailey child was born..

Twenty years later a Thomas Dailey, age 38, is listed in the census records as head of household with his wife and four children. Sally Jackson, age 62, is also living with him.

No doubt the Thomas of 1850 was one and the same person as Thomas Dailey of 1870, and Aunt Sal Stanford (Sally Balance) was his mother.

I suspect that, at the very least, Aunt Sal Stanford was never one to hold to convention, or to care much how other folks judged her. I like to think of her as one of Ocracoke's early independent thinkers - strong-willed, self-assured, and confident, not unlike many island women of today. How I would like to have known her!

Thus it is no surprise to learn that Aunt Sal Stanford always claimed she wanted to be buried in a Hackmatack box so, as she was fond of explaining, she "would be able to go to Hell a-poppin' and a-snappin'!"

Unfortunately, we don't know exactly where Aunt Sal Stanford is buried. A number of Jackson graves were washed away due to sound-side erosion. Exposed remains were re-buried in unmarked graves.

One can only hope that if there is a Creator, He or She values spunk and verve, and above all else has a sense of humor. I, for one, prefer imagining Paradise populated with people like Aunt Sal Stanford, no matter where she herself expected to spend eternity.