

Even though Strawberry Chapel and its silver miraculously survived the Brits and their plundering protocols of the early 1780s, the events of 1865 would be a slightly different story.

By late February 1865, Keating Ball already knew the fates of most Ashley River plantations and outlying parish houses: they were in ashes. Thus, it was only a matter of time—hours perhaps—before troops would be streaming up the Cooper River toward Keating’s generations-old family home, Comingtee Plantation, named for the area’s first English settler, John Coming, and a geographical T-shaped fork formed by two branches of the river. The Ball family had been instrumental in sustaining Strawberry Chapel since its establishment, worshiping there regularly and serving on the vestry generation after generation. Certainly not one to abandon this family tradition, Keating had served as chairman of the vestry before the war and near its end was still acting as Strawberry’s warden—an unenviable position in light of the current disorder that surrounded him.¹⁸⁴

Keating had already traveled the two-mile stretch to Strawberry earlier in the day to retrieve the church’s five-piece communion service—which included the two Brewton-made pieces and the mahogany chest that held them. He stored them in his closet, while a few slaves “helped him bury the family silver and hide the portraits...” His own belongings secured, Keating moved on to protecting the Strawberry items, turning to his most trusted servant, a slave named “Friday,” to help hide its silver.

By nightfall, with Charleston, its periphery and waterways becoming more and

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more crowded with Federal troops, the pair could delay no longer. Friday, with Keating following closely, carried the chest from Comingtee’s main house over to its rice mill, removed some floorboards and lowered himself into a waist-deep pit. There, working in near-total darkness with only a single lantern between them, Friday buried Strawberry Chapel’s most prized possessions in the dirt, while Keating remained above ground making sure no one—no one—witnessed the act.¹⁸⁵

Mercifully, Yankee troops spared the torch at both Comingtee and Strawberry Chapel, although Keating was never sure exactly why. Indeed several soldiers had come calling in the days following his and Friday's covert operation, but thanks in large part to Keating's hospitality, having "so gentle yet firm a courtesy...the officer in command not only restrained his men but gave a paper of protection." Finally, after a few tense weeks and months, things settled down just enough to consider a renewal of Sunday services at Strawberry, and of everyone on the vestry, none was more eager than Keating to retrieve the silver.

*But...when they returned to the mill to recover the buried chest, they could not find it, Digging at the spot which Friday was sure was the right one, they turned up only black soil. Keating Ball—who hadn't actually gone under the mill—realized that he couldn't be sure of the exact spot. As for Friday, his mind had been in a turmoil that night. Sure that a further search would reveal the chest, they had probed and dug everywhere, covering, as they thought, practically the whole of the extensive area under the mill. Though they returned again and again to the task they found nothing.*¹⁸⁶

Over the next dozen years or so, Keating and a few other Ball family members tried again and again to find Strawberry Chapel's lost silver but eventually gave up, concluding that someone had seen the twosome's exploits that night and either stole it or "betrayed it to the Federal raiders." When Keating Ball died in 1891, the real story of what had actually happened to Strawberry Chapel's communion silver appeared to go with him. Truly his death was a critical one insofar as it all but erased whatever factual evidence or intricate knowledge had existed up until then of the silver's whereabouts. Over the course of time, its history morphed into hazy legend.¹⁸⁷

Within a half century of Keating's death, in fact, Comingtee and a few other neighboring plantations had all been converted into a collective hunting preserve, with Grover Sullivan working as the property superintendent. In January 1946, however, his somewhat predictable routine was altered by an interesting phone call informing him that Mrs. Charlotte Ball, daughter to one of Keating's cousins, would be stopping by to explore some old story of buried treasure that her father had once insisted was true. Of course, both Grover and his wife, Martha, knew the legend, having heard countless retellings of it since moving onto the property, and knowing Charlotte to be a member of Comingtee's long-heralded Ball family, they were happy to oblige her curiosity.¹⁸⁸

What neither of the Sullivans knew, however, was who and, more importantly, what Charlotte was bringing with her. Apparently, with World War II won and done, geological, archaeological and historical institutions had taken to buying up surplus metal detectors, and this had given Charlotte an idea. At her urging, a close

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friend with ties to New York's Fort Ticonderoga made some calls, ultimately convincing the site's general manager, Milo King, to bring his newly acquired device down to Charleston and hopefully settle once and for all the matter of Strawberry's lost silver.¹⁸⁹

Following Charlotte's version of the tale and with metal detector at the ready, Milo, Charlotte, Martha, Grover and a few others descended on Comingtee. The group was soon creeping from the main house to the rice mill and then down into the depths of the crawlspace. Martha later recalled the day's less-than-exciting events: "There must have been I don't know how many nails and old pieces of metal and all under there," and every last one set the detector off in a frenzy of beeps and chirps. For hours the work continued, and by day's end, the group's struggles had produced only a few handfuls of nails, some broken milling parts and a rusted-out iron sheet. A visibly disappointed Charlotte raised herself from below ground and departed Comingtee empty-handed. Milo King left with the metal detector the next morning.¹⁹⁰

For them, the search was over, but for whatever reason, Grover and Martha remained unsatisfied by the luckless escapade beneath Comingtee's rice mill. After a sleepless night or two, both decided they would continue the search and perhaps at last remedy Keating Ball's misfortune. Though Grover's job kept him busy during the day, he and Martha returned to the rice mill night after hapless night for almost a week. Finally, on what Grover said would be their last night of digging and searching, Martha watched her husband find Strawberry Chapel's silver.