

**Pistols at Dawn: A History of Dueling**

**A Quest Club Paper**

**by**

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I have a tough act to follow.

This isn't the first time a paper on dueling has been shared in Fort Wayne. During the 14<sup>th</sup> annual commencement exercises of the Fort Wayne High School and the training school, Edgar D. Rogers, a member of the graduating class, delivered an original oration entitled, "Dueling." According to *The Fort Wayne Daily Sentinel*, Mr. Rogers "gave the origin(of dueling), briefly traced the history of the wicked custom of private dueling, and congratulated his hearers upon the fact that the duel is universally condemned by the public sentiment of the United States. He ascribed this popular feeling largely to the celebrated Burr-Hamilton duel of which he gave a graphic account. The speaker condemned the duel in the severest terms and showed why it is a brutal and disgusting crime and a relic of barbarian ages. The oration was an excellent one in every respect. The delivery was fair although it might have been improved by an occasional gesture, and by a little less banter in some portions. The young gentleman received his share of floral tributes."

By that graduation day in June 1878, critics of dueling had been preaching, printing, and otherwise extolling the evil made manifest by the practice of pointed pistols at ten paces for more than 100 years:

- "...we get along through life well enough without shooting at each other," writes editor George Wood in the February 22, 1845, edition of the *Fort Wayne Times and People's Press*. "Of course we are not competent to give advice," he continues, "but if permitted to do so we suspect there would be but one opinion in this quarter as to the change that ought to be introduced into the "codes of honor"" that regulate this species of manslaughter – and that is, that all concerned in a fatal contest, principals and seconds, should either shoot themselves...or be shot or hung – every man of them."

- To his congregation at Christ Church in Baltimore on April 28, 1811, the Reverend Frederic Beasley laments, “I can scarcely form any conception of a wretch more hateful to God and who ought to be more hateful to man, than the professed duelist. The very epithet applied to him implies that his trade is this species of polite assassination. He is a beast of prey, a sanguivorous animal, who prowls through the haunts of polite society in quest of objects to devour. In the most inoffensive language and deportment, he snuffs an insult and immediately commences the pursuit of his unfortunate victim and stops not a moment until he has bathed himself in his blood. What an object of detestation is such a creature both to God and man!”
- In a letter to Thomas Percival in July 1784, Benjamin Franklin professes, “It is astonishing that the murderous practice of dueling should continue so long in vogue. Formerly, when duels were used to determine lawsuits, from an opinion that Providence would, in every instance, favor truth and right with victory, they were excusable; at present, they decide nothing. A man says something, which another tells him is a lie. They fight; but whichever is killed, the point in dispute remains unsettled. To this purpose they have a little story. A famous French duelist was sitting at a café and turned to a stranger asking him to move away because he smelled. ‘That is an affront, and you must fight me.’ ‘I will fight you if you insist upon it,’ said the duelist, ‘but I do not see how that will mend the matter. For if you kill me, I shall stink too; and if I kill you, you will stink, if possible, worse than you do at present.’ How can such miserable sinners as we are entertain so much pride as to conceit that every offence against our imagined honor merits death? These petty princes – makes himself judge in his own cause, condemns the offender without a jury and undertakes himself to be the executioner.”

Most scholars agree with Dr. Franklin that dueling developed from trials by judicial combat, instituted by Gundebald, king of the Burgundians, in the year 501 AD. “Right would triumph,” writes historian Barbara Holland, “God would see to it. And if the stronger usually did win, why then, whence came his strength if not from God? Under royal supervision, two litigants faced each other and took an oath not to use any charms or magic potions. Then one of them flung down a glove and the other picked it up as a sign of acceptance, spawning the phrase ‘flinging down the gauntlet.’ All duels were licensed and regulated by the king. If the two of you wanted to fight you applied to the king to grant you a field and set a time and date.”

Judicial duels became duels of chivalry after the tenth century and the arrival of knighthoods. These were one-on-one battles over property and propriety that caused nobility to attend the proceedings. It is thought that the first recorded tournament in Italy, in 1156, followed an earlier one in Antioch, crusader knights participating in both. In those days of knightly chivalry it took many years of training to perfect the use of sword, mace, or lance.

Two Latin words, “duo” and “bellum,” combine in the word “duel” (war between two), which carries the definition of “a prearranged combat between two persons fought with deadly weapons according to an accepted code of procedure, especially to settle a private quarrel” (Random House Unabridged Dictionary). By the 15<sup>th</sup> century it was becoming clear that a king wasn’t really needed to approve the settlement personal disputes in public. Meanwhile, knights were turning into gentlemen, no longer jousting for glory but dueling in private. In France alone, in just 21 years of Henri IV’s reign (1589-1610) perhaps ten thousand gentlemen died for their honor. From Ireland to Italy, Europe to Serbia, the duel had become a ritualistic concern, a rite of culture and caste. Dueling came to American shores with her first settlers: this country’s first duel was recorded in 1621 in Plymouth Rock.

By the 1700s the clash of metal had been replaced by the sound of pistols. Many Europeans frowned on the use firearms, calling them tools for cheaters and that those who used such weapons were too lazy to learn the art of swordsmanship. Since virtually anyone could fire a gun, dueling was now seen as more democratic if not chaotic. Now any man could call out another to guns drawn over a disagreement on practically anything. Rules were soon devised to bring an order and etiquette to the deadly proceedings.

In his 1907 history of Clonmel, the county town of County Tipperary in Ireland, William Burke notes that Tipperary gentry earned special distinction in the great Irish characteristic of fighting for being most practical and prized at the pistol with no difficulty in finding excuses for shooting one another. “Tipperary gentry were ready to fight in any cause or none,” Burke writes, “everyone had, at some time, to defend ‘his honour.’”

The principal court of County Tipperary held its seasonal sessions in the town of Clonmel. During the summer sessions, or assizes, of 1777, delegates of Tipperary and four other counties agreed on a list of 26 rules detailing every aspect of a duel among gentlemen. The resulting *Code Duello* offered guidance such as:

- The first offence requires the first apology, though the retort may have been more offensive than the insult. Example: A tells B he is impertinent, etc. B retorts that he lies; yet A must make the first apology because he gave the first offence, and then, after one fire, B may explain away the retort by subsequent apology. But, if the parties would rather fight on, then after two shots each, but in no case before, B may explain first, and A apologize afterward.

The *Duello* included protocols to be respected, such as the proper times in which challenges could be delivered and received, the specific roles of appointed assistants (or “seconds”), how many shots could (or should) be fired and how many wounds could be received before satisfaction was properly attained. Though these “Clonmel Rules” laid out in print what was to be expected of

persons participating in such affairs, historian John Norris writes that dueling was never legal in Ireland and so any such set of rules had no standing in a court of law should a trial result from someone killing his adversary in a duel. There had been other rulebooks for duels by sword, notably two Italian printed guides – the *Flower of Battle*, written circa 1410 and *Il Duello* from around 1550. The Irish *Code Duello* was the first to formally accept the use of pistols.

The practice of dueling and the points of honor that were settled at Clonmel were open to interpretation and variation between countries and across continents. In France, six different types of duels were recognized, while across the Austro-Hungarian Empire seven types of duels were at one time known to be practiced. A basic type of duel was the form where the duelists fired from stationary points that had been marked out at a distance of between fifteen and thirty-five paces. Historian Robert Baldick writes that a pace measures 30-inches, noting that the British Code of Duel suggests duels at no less than ten paces or 24 feet. On the agreed signal both men would step forward and the pistols would be presented to the principals in an un-cocked state. If there was nothing else to be said the two men would cock their weapons and fire.

Dueling diversity included an option for the offended man to fire first with the other man firing a fraction afterwards once the agreed signal had been given to exchange shots. Some duels stipulated a time limit of one minute in which the first man must fire. Opponents could also face away from one another, holding their pistols in readiness. At the command they would turn, cocking their pistols in one movement and fire without hesitation.

Beyond such stationary duels there were “moving duels” in which opponents could fire while advancing toward each other up to the agreed upon separation distance. Another option was the use of a “barrier,” a single rope or a piece of wood, with firing to take place at any time during the walk forward towards the barrier. One version of a barrier duel was called an “interrupted march” during which principals walked in a zig-zag fashion on the way to the barrier. There was also

“parallel line” dueling where the principals were kept separated by two parallel lines about fifteen paces apart. In all cases they could fire at any time during the affair but whoever fired first had to remain standing where he was if he missed his opponent.

A most fatal form of dueling was called “to the handkerchief.” Principals chose their weapons and used their free hand to hold the corner of a handkerchief. At literally two arms lengths it was virtually impossible to miss. However, unknown to the principals, only one pistol had been loaded, and so it was very much “luck of the draw,” as the expression is known, as to which of the principals picked up the loaded weapon.

Then there was the “elevated duel.” In 1808, two Frenchmen, M. de Grandpree and M. le Pique, quarreled over an actress who was supposed to be the former’s mistress but got caught in a compromising position with the latter. Because, they said, they had “elevated minds,” they agreed to fight an elevated duel. From a field next to the Tuileries, they rose up in a pair of hot-air balloons, each with a second and a supply of blunderbusses. The balloonists managed to stay within roughly 80 yards of each other when they’d risen to about 2,500 feet. Monsieur LePique fired and missed. Monsieur de Grandpree fired back, apparently not at his opponent but at the more obvious target, his balloon. It dropped like a stone. Triumphant, the victor soared off into the sky, descending unhurt some 20 miles away.

The 26 rules of the *Code Duello* of 1777 would be revised several times over the next 60 years. A British version was published in 1824, followed in 1829 by one written by Irish author Joseph Hamilton with the title: *The Only Approved Guide Through All the Stages of a Quarrel: Containing the Royal Code of Honor; Reflections Upon Duelling; and the Outline of a Court for the Adjustment of Disputes; with Anecdotes, Documents and Cases, Interesting to Christian Moralists Who Decline the Combat, to Experienced Duellists, and to Benevolent Legislators.* Finally, former South Carolina Governor John Lyde Wilson took it upon himself to revise the

rules and add his recommendations for his state's undisciplined duelists. In 1838, Wilson published *The Code of Honor: Or Rules for the Government of Principals and Seconds in Dueling*. Southerners considered it a masterpiece of its time.

The etiquette of the duel was often a life saver. A common thread throughout all the manuals and instruction books was the use of time for duelists and their seconds to work through a heated disagreement and exhaust all means of resolution before meeting on a field of honor.

A second was a volunteer arbiter of sorts. The *Duello's* rule 21 states, "Seconds are bound to attempt reconciliation before the meeting takes place." A second would deliver challenges and communiques, meet with his principal's rival's second, propose remedies that would soothe emotional wounds and hopefully lead both parties to subsequently call the whole thing off. Failing this, seconds were to negotiate all aspects of the duel and ensure a fair fight.

Knowing more of the "what" of dueling allows us to segue to the "who." What follows is a sampling of persons – lawyers, legislators, presidents, newspaper editors, men of business and letters, as well as women of society – who have had close or fatal encounters in duels of their day:

- During the reign of George III (1760-1820), there were 172 known duels in England (and very likely many more kept secret), resulting in 69 recorded fatalities. At one time or another, Irish statesman Edmund Burke, former British Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger and Irish playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan all took the field. English biographer Samuel Johnson defended the practice, saying, "A man may shoot the man who invades his character as he may shoot him who attempts to break into his house."
- In 1754 as a young militia officer, George Washington argued with a smaller man, one William Payne, who made up for the disparity in size by knocking Washington down with a stick. Such an affront among a certain class of Virginia gentlemen almost invariably called for



a duel. That must have been what Payne was expecting when Washington summoned him to a tavern the following day. Instead, he found the colonel at a table with a decanter of wine and two glasses. Washington apologized for the quarrel, and the two men shook hands. In later years as general of the Continental Army, Washington, who needed all the good soldiers he could get, congratulated one of his officers for refusing a challenge, noting that there are few military decisions that are not offensive to one party or another.”

- While he was our second president, John Adams insulted James Monroe, later our fifth president, and Monroe consulted with James Madison, later our fourth president. Ignoring Adams’s remark seemed impossible to Monroe, for “not to notice it may with many leave an unfavorable impression against me.” Responding personally with a challenge to a duel was also impossible acknowledged Monroe, saying “I cannot, I presume, as he is an old man and the president.” Madison agreed and suggested Monroe write still another furious paper instead, so he did. Adams insulted a lot of people but he didn’t fight duels. When Alexander Hamilton challenged him, Adams wouldn’t even answer.
- In 1805, a friend of Andrew Jackson’s deprecated the manner in which Captain Joseph Ervin had handled a bet with Jackson over a horse race. Ervin’s son-in-law, Charles Dickinson, became enraged and started quarreling with Jackson’s friend, which led to Jackson becoming involved. Dickinson wrote to Jackson calling him a “coward and an equivocator.” The affair continued, with more insults and misunderstandings, until Dickinson published a statement in the *Nashville Review* in May 1806, calling Jackson a “worthless scoundrel, ... a poltroon and a coward.” Jackson challenged Dickinson to a duel very much according to the customs of the time in the south. Dickinson, known as one of the best shots in Tennessee if not the best, had choice of weapons and chose pistols. Dickinson fired the first shot, which broke two of

Jackson's ribs and lodged two inches from his heart. Dickinson then had to stand at the mark as Jackson, clutching his chest, aimed slowly and shot him fatally. Jackson's wound never healed properly and abscesses formed around the bullet, causing pain and some debilitation for Jackson's remaining 39 years.

- In August 1831, Congressman Spencer Pettis, who was running for reelection in Missouri, challenged Army Postmaster Maj. Thomas Biddle, who had called Pettis “a bowl of skimmed milk.” Biddle was the challenged party, and, being nearsighted, stipulated a distance of five feet, with pistols. Their weapons, in position, actually overlapped each other. Both fired their guns with remarkable coolness. They even exchanged forgiveness on the ground. Pettis died the day after, and Biddle the third day after the duel.
- In 1842, Abraham Lincoln, then a Whig representative in the Illinois legislature, wrote a series of satirical letters under the pseudonym Rebecca, in which he made scathing fun of State Auditor James Shields, a Democrat. The letters were published in a newspaper. Upon learning that Lincoln had written the pieces, Shields demanded a retraction in a handwritten note delivered to Lincoln that read: “I have become the object of slander, vituperation and personal abuse. Only a full retraction may prevent consequences which no one will regret more than myself.” Lincoln refused to retract his remarks. He returned Shields's letter with the request that Shields rewrite it in a more “gentlemanly” fashion. Instead, Shields challenged Lincoln to a duel. It would be held in Missouri, where dueling was still legal. Lincoln accepted. Sources differ on the choice of weapons; some say Lincoln suggested they throw cow dung at each other. They settled on cavalry broadswords, which both men were to wield while standing on a narrow plank with limited room for retreat. The advantage would obviously be Lincoln's; he was the taller man, with memorably long arms. “To tell you the

truth,” he told a friend later, “I did not want to kill Shields, and felt sure that I could disarm him . . . ; and, furthermore, I didn’t want the damned fellow to kill me, which I rather think he would have done if we had selected pistols.” One report suggests that as the two men faced each other, Lincoln swung his sword high above Shields to cut through a nearby tree branch, demonstrating the immensity of Lincoln’s reach and strength. The dispute was settled by the seconds for Lincoln and Shields who negotiated a statement acceptable to all.

The Civil War Trust’s Kelsey Johnston notes that two decades later, the Civil War would bring the two men together once more. Shields was now a Brigadier General in the Army of the Potomac and Lincoln was President, with the ability to promote and demote military officers. Fighting in the Shenandoah Valley in March 1862, Shields delivered Stonewall Jackson's only defeat at the Battle of Kernstown and was gravely wounded in the process. Lincoln nominated him for promotion to Major General, symbolically burying all ill-feelings between the two men.

Years later, when the matter of his being in a duel was brought up in conversation the president was adamant. “I do not deny it,” he told an Army officer who had referred to the incident, “but if you desire my friendship, you will never mention it again.”

- Henry Martyn Williams (1843-1917) was the son of Allan Hamilton's business partner Jesse Lynch Williams (1807-1886) and Susan Creighton of Fort Wayne. Henry went to the University of Gottingen and spent 4 months at the University of Jena in Germany. Later he attended the equally progressive University of London. While in Germany Henry was challenged to a duel but his skill with pistols led the challenging party to rethink the challenge and apologize to Henry rather than face his wrath and ability with a gun.

- The 1847 election to decide who would represent Fort Wayne and the Tenth Congressional District pitted Democrat William Rockhill against Whig William G. Ewing. According to historian Mark Neely, Thomas Tigar's *Fort Wayne Sentinel*, the Democratic newspaper, had boosted William Rockhill's candidacy by insinuating that William Ewing, a man well-connected to the Indian trade and vast fur-trading ventures, would place his personal interests in Indian claims above Tenth District interests. The paper's "Coon Skin Bill" allegations played on the fears even of Ewing's onetime business associates who were themselves Whigs. Ewing lost the election by less than 200 votes. Six months after the election Thomas Tigar ran another article claiming that Ewing wanted to run for office again but that the local Whigs spurned him for another candidate. An abusive answer to Tigar's editorial, probably written by Ewing, appeared immediately in the Whig newspaper, *Fort Wayne Times and People's Press*. Among the attacks, the letter called Tigar a "notorious lying and dastardly scoundrel," a "sower of calumny," a "poltroon editor" and a "miserable unprincipled wretch." The verbal assault did not satisfy Ewing. Two weeks later Ewing attacked Tigar on the streets of Fort Wayne with a sword-cane. The editor escaped serious injury. Ewing turned himself in to a friendly mayor, and the whole disturbance resulted only in Ewing's payment of a five dollar fine for breach of the peace – a fine he could well afford.
- Opposing newspaper editors put on their pistols when they dressed in the morning. Pressed for time, one 19th-century San Francisco editor posted a notice on his door, "Subscriptions received from 9 to 4, challenges from 11 to 12 only." In Vicksburg, Mississippi (est. pop. 3,500), three newspaper editors died in duels in 1843 and the early part of 1844. In Kentucky, the proslavery Charles Wickliffe killed the editor of the *Lexington Gazette* over an anonymous dissenting article. He was tried and acquitted, but the succeeding editor, George Trotter,

disagreed with the verdict. Wickliffe challenged him and was killed at eight feet.

- Women not only caused many duels but actually participated in some. In 1721, a Lady de Nestle met the Countess de Polignac with pistols in the gardens of Versailles over the handsome Duc de Richelieu. Their first shots went wild, but in the second round de Nestle was badly wounded.
- In August 1777, unattended by seconds, a certain Mademoiselle Leverrier, a young lady of good family who had been jilted by a naval officer called Duprez, met the latter in a street in Paris. Instead of shooting the man down, as she could have done, she generously handed him a pistol and told him to defend himself. There, however, her consideration for him stopped, for while he chivalrously fired his pistol into the air, she shot him full in the face.
- During the silver boom in Colorado during the 1870s, Mattie Silks was the Queen of the Denver Tenderloin and commonly wore a queen-like costume, complete with cloak and train. She loved money but loved a gambler named Cort Thompson even more. So did Katie Fulton. Stories suggest Cort Thompson was probably playing both sides of the street. All the proper formalities were observed as the two ladies met on the grounds of the Denver Brewery, which assured a good attendance. Prominent among the spectators was the dashing Cort Thompson. When the pistols roared and the smoke cleared, both Mattie and Kate were obviously unhurt. Then, among the crowd, a man slowly crumpled. Cort Thompson was dead with a bullet in his handsome head, presumably from Mattie Silks's gun. Accident? Or good shooting? Only Mattie ever knew; there was no police investigation.
- According to biographer Andrew Hoffman, Mark Twain was "inflexibly opposed to the dreadful custom of dueling," yet he had a brush with a duel in 1864 in Virginia City, Nevada. Twain was writing columns in the *Territorial Enterprise*, where he claimed that a rival paper,

the *Virginia City Union*, had reneged on a pledge to the US Sanitary Fund, ancestor of the American Red Cross. The Union's publisher, James Laird, challenged him to a duel (the Union had just paid its pledge as Twain's column was printed.) Twain was a horrible shot. His second, Steve Gillis, came up with a plan. He snatched Twain's gun and shot the head off a small bird just before Laird and his friends arrived. "Who did that?" asked Laird's second. Gillis said that Twain had done it and could do it over and over again...so, you don't want to fight that man – it's just like suicide...you'd better settle this thing now." Sounds like Mark Twain but perhaps more like something Tom Sawyer would have thought up.

There are stories of duels, and then there is the story of "The Duel," or the "Interview in Weehawken" since dueling was illegal in New York. Prior to the fatal meeting in July 1804, Alexander Hamilton had forestalled Aaron Burr's challenges on two other occasions. Hamilton had been involved in eleven other "affairs of honor," a descriptor defined by historian Joanne Freeman as "an ambiguous blend of the selfless, the self-interested, the political, and the personal." In this case, these were political leaders of prominence – Burr had been Thomas Jefferson's vice president. Hamilton had been Secretary of the Treasury, and the primary author of the economic policies of the George Washington administration and arguably the most powerful figure in the Federalist Party.

Burr's mercurial political alliances had created animosity in Hamilton going back to 1789 when Burr accepted the office of attorney general in New York after campaigning for Hamilton's candidate, who lost. Two years later Burr defeated Philip Schuyler, Hamilton's father-in-law, in the race for US Senate where, once established, Burr opposed Hamilton's fiscal program. Hamilton, in turn, opposed Burr's candidacy for vice president in 1792 and later blocked his nomination as American minister to France. Hamilton lobbied his Federalist colleagues to support Jefferson over Burr when the presidential race of 1800 went into the House of Representatives to

break a tie vote. When he learned that Republicans would drop him when Jefferson ran for a second term, Burr switched parties again in a failed campaign for New York governor.

Hamilton's anti-Burr comments were a mix of personal dislike but more from a fear of what would happen to the new republic under Burr's ominous talents. "The exchange of words over these years that preceded the exchange of shots was," writes author Joseph Ellis, "a culmination of long-standing personal animosity and political disagreement that emerged naturally...almost inevitably, out of the supercharged political culture of the early republic."

On June 18, 1804, Burr demanded an explanation from Hamilton for negative comments about Burr in a letter two months earlier to the *Albany Register*. The subsequent exchange of letters with Burr could not deflect the impending challenge to a duel even as Hamilton sought to distinguish between personal and political criticism that might change the dispute from an affair of honor to a political difference of opinion. Once Burr denied such a distinction and extended his demands to cover their entire political careers, Hamilton was trapped.

Why did these men agree to the duel? Joseph Ellis suggests "Burr was there because Hamilton had been libeling him throughout their crisscrossing careers in public life...Hamilton was there because he could not honestly deny Burr's charges, which he sincerely believed captured the essence of the man's character...If he did not answer Burr's challenge, [Hamilton felt] he would be repudiating his well-known convictions, and lose the respect of those political colleagues on whom his reputation depended." Joanne Freeman observes that "compelled by the mandates of politics and honor, dependent on an ill-defined public for political career and private sense of self, Burr and Hamilton dueled because they were afraid not to."

In what would be his final days, Hamilton writes out a "Statement on the Impending Duel," explaining how someone of his stature could be involved in an exchange of shots at ten paces. He states at one point, "The ability to be in future useful, whether in resisting mischief or effecting

good...would probably be inseparable from a conformity with public prejudice in this particular.”

Of this Barbara Holland reflects, “It’s curious, the number of sensible men who steeled themselves to the risk of the duel, came to terms with the possibility of death, hoped to die bravely and well, wrote their wills and a few last letters and went forth to the meeting, and were stricken with horror to find themselves still standing and their adversary dead. They’d readied themselves to die but not to kill. The other man lying bleeding to death caught them by surprise.”

I commend Joseph Ellis’s *Founding Brothers* as the book dissects the events of the day of the duel. Killing Hamilton drove Burr into physical, intellectual, and political exile. Meanwhile, quoting Joanne Freeman once more, “Hamilton closed his life with an intimate, heartfelt statement that professed his willingness to die for the public good; he depicted himself as an exemplary duelist, compelled to fight, unwilling to kill, gaining nothing, sacrificing all. There was no more effective way to prove oneself a martyr and to prove one’s foe, by default, a fiend.”

In September 1804, one month after the Hamilton-Burr affair, Dr. Timothy Dwight, the president of Yale College, delivered a sermon on the folly, guilt, and mischiefs of dueling. He quoted Proverbs 28:17, “A man that does violence to the blood of any person, shall flee to the pit; let no man stay him.” Dwight preached that, “The deliberate killing of a man is murder, by the decision of common sense, by the decision of human law, and by the decision of God...Dueling is eminently absurd, because the reasons which create the contest are generally trivial. These are almost always trifling affronts which a magnanimous man would disdain to regard.”

Such magnanimity was in short supply in the southern states of 19<sup>th</sup>-century America as, sometimes, white men of the Antebellum South pulled or tweaked one another’s noses. In a larger language of honor, nose pulling was another more aggressive form of accusing a man of lying. Historian Kenneth Greenberg states that for Southern men “a man of honor valued public acclamation for the parts of a man that are visible to the public, including the visible surface of his



body, his words, and his version of the truth.” Republican Brockholst Livingston of New York insulted Federalist James Jones of Georgia. Jones beat him with his stick on the floor of Congress and then went for the grand slam by grabbing and twisting his nose. In the resulting duel, Jones was killed. Afterward Livingston was said to be “conscious of having done nothing but what he was compelled to do and at the same time sorry for the necessity.”

As self-styled aristocrats, and frequently slaveholders, Southern gentlemen contended that “honor” was not a meaningless term or catchall but rather a reference to reputation for fair dealing, for honoring contracts, for paying debts. An attack upon a man's honor, therefore, was a dire threat to his business and to his family’s well-being. Researchers Christopher Kingston and Robert Wright described the economic impact of dueling in a 2009 study, noting that, “To those accustomed to obtaining bank loans, risking life and limb to reestablish one’s credit seems absurd. To those accustomed to private credit markets, not defending one’s honor was the absurdity.” The study suggests that the honor and creditworthiness of the winning duelist was upheld and even enhanced. “Accusations against character were erased; the winner had signaled the credit market that he was a...courageous leader capable of defending his property...The loser lost his life, but that outcome many thought preferable to living life dishonored. Once accused, it was often better to have dueled and lost than not to have dueled at all.”

While northern states viewed dueling as a cultural throwback, dueling thrived in the South and far West through the late 1800s. The names of the “fields of honor” could be synonymous with today’s athletic stadiums – Belle Isle in the James River, Vidalia in the Mississippi, and Bloody Island served Saint Louis. There was the Bladensburg dueling grounds in Maryland outside Washington, DC, that witnessed approximately 50 duels, including one in which naval hero Stephen Decatur was mortally wounded in 1820 by James Barron. Memphis duelists crossed the river into Arkansas to fight; mid-river, on a paddle-wheel steamer, was a law-free oasis. New

Orleans went to the Oaks by City Park. On a single busy Sunday in 1839, 10 duels were fought under the Oaks.

Historians agree that the demise of dueling is connected to the carnage of the Civil War in the United States and the loss of life abroad in World War I. Men realized that it was more profitable to sue someone through court actions instead of risking one's life at the point of a gun, which was not only illegal but downright murderous in intent. Ross Drake writes in the *Smithsonian* that, "for those who survived the Civil War to lead the New South, dying for chivalry's sake no longer appealed. Even among old dueling warriors, the ritual came to seem like something antique. Looking back on life's foolishness, one South Carolina general, seriously wounded in a duel in his youth, was asked to recall the occasion. 'Well I never did clearly understand what it was about,' he replied, but you know it was a time when all gentlemen fought.'"

By the late 1800s, dueling had begun an irreversible decline. Public opinion was accomplishing what legislation could not achieve – for not only was the audience of those who were impressed by dueling diminishing, but the way duels were conducted became extremely unsociable, as if the duelist was performing primarily for his own benefit, to convince himself of his own honor. This may be one reason to why the West was so wild as the 20<sup>th</sup> century arrived.

Whatever rationale its advocates offered for dueling it still remained a capricious waste of too many lives. This was especially true in the Navy: between 1798 and the Civil War, the Navy lost two-thirds as many officers to dueling as it did to more than 60 years of combat at sea.

The days of dueling had coincided with the nation building across Europe and across the Atlantic. In this societal development, men of rank and aspiration rose to leadership positions with the help of their success in duels. The result was more than a defense of honor – it was an establishment of authority, which psychologists say is comprised of dominance and status. In places beyond the reach of the state, like rural frontiers, or in times when the state did not

formally exist, dueling served as an arbiter of authority and the distribution of respect because it involved social equals.

The British historian George Macaulay Trevelyan writes, “As the spirit of the age became less aristocratic and more bourgeois, less military and more completely civilian and more ‘seriously’ religious and, let us say at once, more sensible, dueling gradually dropped out.” Professor Victor Stater argues that “through their violent antics [duelists] proclaimed independence from a society where moderation and civility were slowly becoming the standard of gentlemanly behavior.”

So it was that in 1778, a duel was arranged between North Carolina representative and signer of the Declaration of Independence John Penn and Henry Laurens, Charleston, South Carolina delegate and president of the Congress. Stunningly, the two men boarded at the same residence while in Philadelphia, even eating breakfast at the same table the morning of the duel. After the meal, the two proceeded to walk together to their fight, conversing all they while. Upon coming to a washed-out section of Fifth Street during the stroll, Penn lent a hand to the much older Laurens, helping him cross over it. As the two proceeded to Chestnut Street, they mutually realized their whole ordeal was “a foolish affair” and turned around.

As it should be.

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