



Dueling in Colonial America

By JOHN T. TRUSSELL

Words can have deadly consequences. Words that were expressed to make one's position clear could be taken as mean, hurtful and damaging to another's character or honor. All too often in Colonial America, damaging words or actions led to a challenge to a duel, often with pistols, where one's mortal life was at risk. Many people died in duels in early Colonial times, and the newly established legal system looked away, considering such matters a private affair between gentlemen. We might wonder how such a deadly practice got started in America, and how did it end?

Our early immigrants brought the concept of dueling to America. The practice had no one birthplace, as it is human nature to fight for territory, love, hate, political gain or an assortment of other reasons. In ancient times, there are many examples of trial by fire or combat,

where leaders would put up their best fighters to determine the outcome of a dispute. The gods above were thought to favor the side with the destiny to win. "God wills it" was often the warriors' rallying cry as they cheered on their supporters. However, if their side lost, all bets were off, and all-out war could occur. Nothing was over until it was over! David and Goliath in the Valley of Elah (1 Samuel 17), where David killed Goliath with a rock between the eyes, is an excellent example of trial by combat, with the small underdog, the boy David, slaying the giant Goliath.



Modern dueling began during the Italian Renaissance, in the 14th to 17th centuries, after the Dark Ages, when humanism, individual achievement and art received renewed attention.

The bard William Shakespeare gave dueling a starring

role in the 1597 play “Romeo and Juliet,” when the young lover, Romeo, was challenged to a duel with swords by Juliet’s hothead cousin, Tybalt. The sword fight ends with Tybalt’s death and Romeo fleeing the city, but don’t let me ruin the tragic ending! From Italy, dueling spread across Europe and took root in France.

In 1386, the King of France, Charles VI, gave his endorsement of dueling when he had two knights settle their differences by swords¹. Jean de Carrouges accused Jacques Le Gris of raping his wife, but the case was not resolved in court; thus, King Charles suggested a duel to the death. The two knights met in full armor. They fought with an assortment of weapons until Carrouges wrestled the larger Le Gris to the ground. He removed Le Gris’ headcover and killed him, thus “proving his charges,” as God was supposed to favor the victor. After this duel, dueling gained acceptance and notoriety in France. As many as 10,000 Frenchmen died in duels during the next centuries, but scant records exist of such activities, many of which were private affairs. Numerous fights ended upon the first bloodshed. Seeing one’s blood pouring on the ground reminds a combatant of his fragile mortality!



The first recorded duel in America occurred at Plymouth Rock on June 18, 1621, when two of Stephen Hopkins’ indentured servants got into an argument of unknown origins. The duel resulted in both Edward Doty and Edward Leister wounded, which caused Hopkins to fear he could lose the labors of two good men. To prevent future such behavior, the men were “hog-tied,” with their feet tied to their heads for 24 painful hours. Ouch! The historical record does not show repeated poor behavior, so they were rehabilitated!²

Dueling action was soon to follow at Jamestown (settled in 1607) in 1624. In 1996, archaeologists discovered the skeletal remains of a young European male who had been shot in the lower leg, causing severe damage and leading to his death. At the time, William Kelso, director of archaeological research at Jamestown Rediscovery, said it might be America’s oldest unsolved murder. But in 2013, Kelso’s team discovered the victim was George Harrison, who was shot by Richard Stephens, a Jamestown merchant. Since Harrison’s wound was to the right side of the knee, he was standing sideways, which could happen in a duel. Stephens survived, but he must have been an

irritable sort, as he later got into a fistfight with Jamestown Gov. John Harvey, who knocked out several of his teeth.³

As America grew and developed into the wilderness, a sort of “do-it-yourself” type of justice grew into the fabric of civilization that was still rough around the edges. Law enforcement and civil justice were often challenging to come by, and personal disputes were too often handled with a let’s-step-outside attitude. Decision-making was clouded by strong Kentucky bourbon and boosted by inflated egos. Lawyers, politicians, military officers, and elected officials were often quick to find offense in others’ words. Their rush to duel was fueled by English writers, such as Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), who wrote, “A man may shoot a man who invades his character, as he may shoot him that invades his house.”⁴

The passions of the moment were inflamed by public knowledge of the disagreement, which could only further heighten the emotions of settling the score. The aggrieved person could challenge an individual to a duel by a “posting” on a wall, bulletin board, or in a bar or meeting place. The posting spelled out his challenge and demands for “satisfaction” to his wounded character. The aggrieved could also take out a paid advertisement in a local newspaper, describing the disagreement and the claim for a duel. This helped sell newspapers and got the locals’ tongues wagging. But some papers refused to publish anything to do with dueling as a moral protest.

On the other end of the spectrum, some duelists chose to meet in private, on lands with unclear legal jurisdictions, such as a sandbar that only appears at low tide, to make prosecution of the duelists an unlikely

event. Grand juries and judges were slow to find fault with dueling, because how can you blame one for murder when both participants freely engaged in the deadly behavior?

Dueling grounds developed in many parts of the growing nation. In Weehawken, N.J., the well-known duel between Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton resulted in Hamilton’s death on July 11, 1804. Less known, and more tragic, is that Hamilton’s son, Phillip, had been killed at the same spot, with the same pistol, not long before.⁵



In Savannah, duelists met in numerous locations, such as Colonial Cemetery, on Cockspur Island, or sand bars near Tybee Island on the coast⁶. Around Savannah, military officers became bored with barracks life, and with no enemy in sight,



The grave of Button Gwinnett in Savannah, Georgia



Grahame Long, in “Dueling in Charleston,” surmised that the city’s hot and humid weather led to irritability and an increase in dueling activity. Most duels occurred between June and September. The creator of the Gadsden “Don’t Tread on Me” flag, Christopher Gadsden, got into a duel with fellow officer Robert Howe. Howe was the commander during the abandonment of Savannah and was not warmly received in Charleston to command the Revolutionary forces. When Gadsden questioned Howe’s fitness to lead the troops, a duel ensued on Aug. 30, 1778. Howe fired the first shot, which barely missed Gadsden’s head. Realizing he was lucky to be alive, Gadsden fired his round harmlessly into the air. Then, in a questionable move, Gadsden challenged Howe to shoot again, but Howe refused

they often got on each other’s nerves.

A historical marker in Colonial Cemetery recounts one tragic duel. It reads, “The epitaph to James Wilde on the nearby tomb is a melancholy reminder of the days of dueling and, particularly, of a tragic affair of honor fought January 16, 1815, on the Carolina side of the river near Savannah. Lieutenant Wilde was shot through Johnson, referred to in the epitaph, in bitterness, as “a man who a short time before would have been friendless, but for him.” The duelists were officers in the 8th Regt. U.S. Infantry. The nature of their quarrel is unknown.

Richard Henry Wilde, the poet and statesman, was the brother of the young officer. Lt. Wilde had served in the Seminole Campaign, and his vivid description of Florida inspired an epic poem, which, like the life of James Wilde, was cut short by the fatal bullet. The unfinished poem is remembered for the beauty of a single lyric, the opening stanza of which is:

*“My life is like the Summer Rose,
That opens to the morning sky;
But ere the shades of evening close,
Is scattered on the ground – to die.”*

Colonial Cemetery is also the final resting place of two Revolutionary-era Patriots, Button Gwinnett and Lachlan McIntosh. Gwinnett was a signer of the Declaration of Independence who got into a long-standing dispute with McIntosh over the leadership of troops in the State of Georgia and other political differences. Gwinnett had also jailed McIntosh’s brother for treason, which was thought to be politically motivated and led to the duel. In the duel, Gwinnett was wounded in the leg and died three days later. After the duel and death of Gwinnett, passions of revenge ran high in Savannah, and McIntosh transferred to George Washington’s command and served admirably during the war. Upon McIntosh’s death, many years later, he was laid to rest within a stone’s throw of Gwinnett’s grave.



In Charleston, duelists often met in a Philadelphia alley in the town or on private plantations. Writer J.

the bait. The two shook hands and departed.

In another Charleston duel, attorney Thomas Hudson challenged fellow attorney and former friend Arthur Smith to a duel after they exchanged insults. Neither dared to apologize. They met and exchanged bullets, both finding their marks and felling each other. Both men were in their 20s and full of promise until killed by vanity and poor judgment.³ The grieving families, perhaps as a message to other would-be duelists, buried the men together in a collective tomb so they would have eternity to resolve their issues.⁷

Another South Carolinian, former Governor John Lyde Wilson, in 1838 put his stamp on the “26 rules of Code Duell,” or rules of dueling, with his book, *The Code of Honor* that included standards for the principals (duelists) and the seconds (friends-managers). The second’s job was to mediate a peaceful resolution. If he failed, it was his responsibility to ensure a fair duel and care for wounded duelers. The second’s job was significant. It involved risk, as Andrew Jackson discovered at the shootout with the Benton brothers at the City Hotel in Nashville, Tenn., on Sept. 4, 1813. A complicated disagreement led to the fight. Jackson took a bullet to his shoulder that he would carry for many years until a doctor successfully removed the slug. Later, Jackson and Benton became political friends and allies.⁸

However, Jackson would carry another bullet, lodged next to his heart, to the grave. On May 30, 1806, Jackson met Charles Dickinson in a duel at Harrison’s Mills on the Red River in Kentucky. Their argument was over a horse race and Dickinson’s poor judgment in insulting Rachel Jackson, Andrew’s beloved wife. Dickinson, an excellent marksman who had killed many in duels, fired first, and the bullet lodged near Jackson’s heart—but he never quivered, standing firm like an old hickory tree. Dickinson proclaimed, “My God, have I missed him?” But Jackson, now more determined to steady his aim, hurled his slug at Dickinson. His aim was true, and Dickinson died quickly. That Jackson survived the duel is nothing short of a miracle.

Jackson went on to be the seventh president of the United States, widely praised and admired as the “People’s President.” Jackson was the last president to serve in the American Revolution, having served as a young messenger in the Battle of Stono Ferry, where his brother, Hugh, was killed. Held as a POW by British troops, he was slashed across the face by a Tory officer

for refusing to polish his boots. Today at the Hermitage, the home of Andrew Jackson in Nashville, visitors can see actors in re-enactments of dueling and get a good understanding of how the time-honored tradition was practiced, especially in the South.⁹



How did dueling end in America? It faded into history, as citizens, who became appalled at the loss of life for vanity, established “dueling prohibition leagues” across the nation and passed laws against it. The massive loss of young life in the Civil War soured the public tolerance for killing, and the stronger civil court system established lawsuits to hit people where it hurt—in the pocketbook!

One may wonder, did the father of our country, George Washington, ever participate in a duel? Many historians believe he had the opportunity to challenge William Payne to a duel after Payne knocked Washington to the ground after a brief exchange of harsh words about political differences. The fight occurred when Washington was in his twenties (1755), in command of Virginia Rangers, stationed at Alexandria, Va. Upon seeing their commander knocked to the ground in a market square, the troops rushed from the barracks, prepared to teach Payne a lesson. Washington calmed them, saying he knew how to handle such matters. All expected a duel to soon follow. The next day, Washington sent for Payne, and when

the latter entered the room, he saw a decanter and two glasses, not pistols, on the table. “Mr. Payne,” said Washington, “to err is human. I was wrong yesterday, but if you have sufficient satisfaction, let us be friends.” Parson Weems told from that day forward, Washington was Payne’s idea of authentic manhood.¹⁰ Perhaps Washington’s lesson is for us to be slow to anger, quick to find peaceful solutions, and always value human life as precious and dear.

ENDNOTES

- 1 THE BOOK OF DUELS, MICHAEL GARRIGA
- 2 WIKIPEDIA, EDWARD DOTY
- 3 WWW.ARCHAEOLOGY.ORG/NEWS 1022-130625, “JAMESTOWN MURDER SOLVED”
- 4 THE LIFE OF SAMUEL JOHNSON, JAMES BOSWELL, P. 299
- 5 ALEXANDER HAMILTON, RON CHERNOW
- 6 SAVANNAH DUELS AND DUELISTS 1733-1877, THOMAS GAMBLE
- 7 DUELING IN CHARLESTON, J. GRAHAME LONG
- 8 AMERICAN HERITAGE MAGAZINE, 1958, VOL. 9, ISSUE 2
- 9 THEHERMITAGE.COM
- 10 A CONCISE HISTORY OF THE CITY OF ALEXANDRIA, VA.: FROM 1669 TO 1883, F.L BROCKETT AND GEORGE W. ROCK; AND “DUEL,” SMITHSONIAN MAGAZINE, MARCH 2004, ROSS DRAKE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John T. Trussell is publicity chairman for the Georgia Society SAR; past president of the Ocmulgee Chapter in Macon, Ga., and an outdoors writer.



If you are an American and a direct male descendant of someone who rendered civil or military service in one of the 13 American colonies before July 4, 1776, consider joining the

NATIONAL SOCIETY SONS OF THE AMERICAN COLONISTS.

For information on its activities and eligibility requirements, contact:

Registrar General R.D. Pollock
P.O. Box 86
Urbana, OH 43078-0086

www.americancolonists.org

National Society Sons of Colonial New England



Gentlemen wishing to honor your male or female ancestors who were born in

CT, NH, MA, ME, RI, VT

before July 4, 1776 should consider joining the NSSCNE

Life Memberships

Registrar General, NSSCNE
147 12th Street SE
Washington, DC 20003-1420

or visit

www.nsscne.org



COMPATRIOTS!

YOU MAY BE ELIGIBLE FOR MEMBERSHIP IN A VERY SELECT ORDER

Numerous SAR members are already affiliated COMPATRIOTS!

Eligibility

Founding Ancestor prior to 1657 and a Revolutionary War Patriot in the same male line. Male line may be from: (1) Father’s Father; (2) Mother’s Father; (3) Father’s Maternal Grandfather; (4) Maternal Grandfather of Mother’s Father; (5) Maternal Grandfather of Father’s Father.

For information, contact:
Daniel C. Warren
1512 Steuben Road
Gloucester Point, VA 23062 or

www.founderspatriots.org