

E
186.3
R4
v. [53]

DUELLING IN RHODE ISLAND
(and Elsewhere)

**Rhode Island
Historical Society**

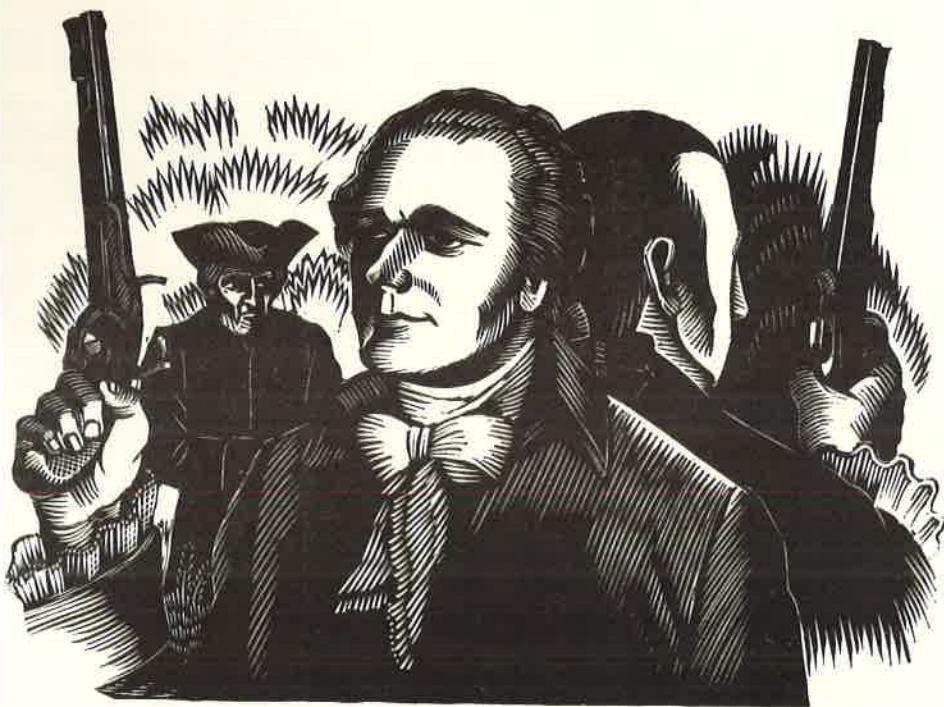
Gift of

Le Baron Colt Anthony, President
Society of Colonial Wars, R.I.

9.19.78



Publication No. 53



Hamilton and Burr
July 11, 1804

DUELLING IN RHODE ISLAND (and Elsewhere)

This paper was originally presented to the Winter Court of the Society of Colonial Wars in Rhode Island by its author, Roger Tillinghast Clapp, Esquire, December 14, 1977.

It is now published by His Excellency, Le Baron Colt Anthony, Governor, and the Council of the Society, for distribution among the members and among a selected group of historical association libraries and similar institutions throughout the United States. In Mr. Clapp's own words, "it tends to be authentic."

It will be noted that most of the events related in this paper took place in the 19th century, somewhat later than the defined scope of the Society (April 19, 1775).

Philip B. Simonds, *Historian*
Providence, December 1978

E

186.3

R4

V. [53]

HISTORY OF DUELLING

Let us begin with the story of a famous duel fought in Jamaica some 160 years ago between two young and titled British officers who had quarrelled over aspersions cast by one of them on the ancestry of the other.

The place was Henderson Park near Port Royal in Jamaica.

The time was six o'clock on a bright April morning.

The duellists — Lord Stackpole and Lord Cecil — two of Britain's best shots — faced each other at the regulation distance of fifteen paces, each rigidly holding his loaded pistol with the muzzle pointing upwards. Each stood slightly sideways so as to present the smallest target to his opponent. The eyes of both were fixed on the handkerchief held by one of the seconds. As the handkerchief fluttered to the ground, both pistols were lowered and the two shots rang out almost as one. Lord Cecil was untouched but Lord Stackpole received a mortal wound but, true to the iron code of British gentlemen, he uttered not a sound nor did any change in his expression betray his dying agony until he lifted his eyes which were dimming with death and saw his opponent standing triumphantly before him. Then he slowly sank to the ground he uttered his immortal last words that have echoed down through the ages: "By George, I've missed him".

Such was the duel as I pictured it in my boyhood — a

romantic encounter between noble gentlemen who had quarrelled over aspersions cast by one of them on the honor of the other or of his fair lady — fought at dawn in a secluded dell in strict accordance with an almost religious ritual known as the Code of Honor. I saw them as exhibitions of superb marksmanship or of dazzling swordplay.

But, at least as far as America was concerned, nothing could be further from the truth. Our duellists were not out to vindicate their honor which in Europe more often than not could be satisfied by a pinking or a “touch of blood”. American duellists, fighting with pistols at the murderous distance of ten paces, were out to kill — not merely to avenge their wounded honor. In the heyday of duelling far more encounters took place in America than anywhere else in the world and far, far more people were killed.

Nor were many American duels fought over matters of personal honor or the honor of a lady. The principal grounds were personal and deliberate insults or political differences. And not infrequently they were initiated to remove an obstacle to someone’s career. This last was particularly true in the armed services where often the only way to remove a hated superior officer was to dream up grounds to challenge him and if luck were with you to bring about his immediate and permanent retirement.

And when it came to the Code of Honor, the instinct of self-preservation frequently took precedence over a gentleman’s obligations under the Code. Many cases were known and many others were suspected where one of the antagonists (sometimes even both) resorted to trickery to win. I’ll tell you about one of these later.

And finally, regardless of how petty, groundless or even (and frequently) vicious the challenge was or what were the odds against survival of the person challenged, if he refused to fight he was publicly posted as a coward and usually forfeited his status as a gentleman. In the British Army and Navy any officer who refused a challenge was promptly cashiered.

As the author of a fascinating book entitled *Pistols at Ten Paces* wrote: “All of this adds up to the most ruthless ‘murder culture’ ever known.”

* * *

This is all in the past. Today practically everywhere in the civilized world duelling is outlawed — except in Uruguay where it is legitimate provided *both* parties are registered blood donors. You will note that they *both* have to be donors since in case of the unfortunate demise of one of them the other could still be looked to for a donation.

But I must admit that little if any of what I have said about American duels applies to the first known one. This took place early in 1621 in Plymouth, Massachusetts between Edward Doty and Edward Leister, both serving-men in the employ of Stephen Hopkins and both of whom had come over with him on the *Mayflower*. It is not known what was the dispute. They fought with swords and daggers and both were wounded, neither of them seriously.

But when the news came to the ears of the Puritan authorities they were furious and hauled the two duellists be-

fore the Assembly of Puritans which found them guilty and sentenced them to be tied to each other — head and foot — for the space of 24 hours without food or drink. (A portion of this sentence was later suspended.)

This sentence reminds one of the standard Army punishment meted out to soldiers caught fighting by putting them to work washing opposite sides of the same window.

I suppose to begin with we should ask just what is a duel. Calling it simply a man-to-man combat won't do. Such was fighting between Roman gladiators; such was medieval jousting; so was David vs. Goliath or Cain vs. Abel.

Incidentally — speaking of Roman gladiators — while ladies were admitted to see the show, they were not allowed to judge. On one occasion a lady sneaked into the judges' box disguised as a man in order to cast a vote as to the fate of one of the fighters who was a personal "favorite" of hers. The authorities were quick to cope with this situation by decreeing that thenceforward all judges were to appear undraped.

I suppose we should define duels as man-to-man combats fought under rules.

The earliest record of the duel is found in the Fifth Century when a king of the Burgundians named Gundobad established what came to be known as trial by battle. His law provided — and I quote — "whenever two Burgundians are at variance, if the challenger shall declare he is ready to maintain, sword in hand, the truth of that he advanced and if

the other shall not then acquiesce it shall be lawful to decide the controversy by dint of sword".

There existed one alternative known as trial by oath where each party would swear to the truth of his case: hence one of them would necessarily have to commit perjury and so call down upon himself the wrath of God. But, as King Gundobad wryly remarked when he permitted trial by combat, "They might as well risk their bodies as their souls."

It was understood, of course, that God would guide the sword arm of the righteous party. However, on occasion one of the parties might doubt the ability of the Almighty to see that justice was done — particularly if his opponent was known as a skillful swordsman: hence it was permitted for the parties to appoint (or hire) proxies or champions to fight for them. The results, however, were a bit drastic: the defeated champion had his sword hand lopped off and his principal was hanged.

Another instance of medieval skepticism as to the ability of the Almighty to be always right in these matters occurred in Spain during the Moorish occupation of the southern half of that country. A Christian knight of Seville challenged a Moorish cavalier to "prove with weapons" whether the religion of Christ was holy and that of Mohammed impious and damnable. But when they heard of this, the ecclesiastical authorities commanded the knight to withdraw his challenge as they "did not choose to compromise Christianity by the result of any such conflict."

Up to the Twelfth Century trial by combat remained the

only honorable way of deciding matters of right between gentlemen (including whether a person accused of crime was guilty or innocent) until Henry II of England instituted the alternative of trial by jury, the jurors then being a panel of citizens picked from the locality where the dispute arose who were therefore supposed to know and so could swear to what the facts of the matter were.

Curiously, trial-by-combat was not finally abolished in England until the Nineteenth Century when in 1817 one Abraham Thornton, charged with murder, claimed the right to "wage his battle;" and, as no one could be found to fight on behalf of the victim, Thornton was acquitted. Shortly afterwards Parliament put an end to trial-by-battle.

I have referred to Codes of Honor. There have been quite a number written but none, as far as I can find, have ever existed in America in written form. They dealt almost entirely with preliminaries since the ground rules for the fight itself were left to be settled by the seconds. (One exception to this appears in a medieval French Code requiring that each party should maintain on oath that he bore no charms or amulets.)

First there was a challenge by the gentleman whose honor had been wounded by the actions or remarks of another alleged gentleman. Generally the challenge was delivered personally by the aggrieved party "calling out" — as the phrase went — the one who had impugned his honor, inviting him to have his "friend" — sometimes adding "if he had one" — call on the "friend" named by the challenger. Once an experienced duellist when challenged by a hot-blooded youngster suggested his opponent bring a sexton

along since, he said, "I would like to see you buried with due ceremony."

For the challenged party to do otherwise than accept was unthinkable, leading to his being posted as a poltroon and a coward — a man utterly without honor.

One interesting exception to this was our own Rhode Island General Nathaniel Greene who was once challenged by one Captain James Gunn, an officer in his command, whom he had severely reprimanded for selling an Army horse (even though a Court of Inquiry had cleared him.) Greene, who was certainly not lacking in bravery, preferred to devote his life to the war rather than risking it on the field of honor and refused the challenge. General Washington, on learning of this, wrote General Greene strongly commending his decision. "Your honor and reputation," wrote Washington, "will stand perfectly acquitted . . . for if a commanding officer is amenable to private call for the discharge of public duty he has a dagger always at his breast."

Once a challenge was issued and accepted, the two friends — or seconds — then met and laid out a game plan for the battle in such form as their principals desired, except that under the Code it was always understood that the challenged party had the choice of weapons — the American standard (which was not always necessarily followed) being pistols at ten paces.

Sometimes unusual weapons were named.

You may remember Mark Twain's fictional specification of brickbats at five feet.

Back in 1843 in France in a duel between two gentlemen named L'Enfant and Mellant, the weapons were billiard balls. Incredibly the encounter ended fatally for M. L'Enfant. May one say he found himself behind the eight-ball?

The Revolutionary War hero Israel Putnam (whose reputation for bravery was unquestioned) was once "called out" by a brash young British officer. Putnam, being the challenged party, then specified that both parties would be seated beside a barrel of gunpowder in which there would be placed a lighted candle, with the stipulation that the first party to move would be the loser — a glorified form of "chicken". Fortunately the duel was never fought as the British officer reneged.

Once a pair of Americans quarrelling over an unpaid gambling debt chose a darkened room as the duelling ground, the contestants being placed at opposite corners. When all was ready, one fired and missed. The other started after his opponent, pistol in hand, but could not locate him until he found that that gentleman had retreated up the chimney. He then presented his weapon to the seat of honor of his adversary and threatened to fire unless he got an apology and \$800, being the amount of the unsettled bet. He got both and as the loser descended his opponent ripped off a portion of the loser's pants as a trophy.

On a South Carolina plantation back in the 1830's two slaves once fought a duel. To ensure it was correctly carried out they had white seconds. They were placed at the regulation ten paces and each was given a loaded pistol. At the word, both fired and both fell to the ground. However, they soon jumped up as their mischievous seconds had loaded the

pistols with blanks. But honor was satisfied.

As to how a gentleman should prepare for a duel, I can do no better than to quote from an 1886 British manual on The Art of Duelling.

On the eve of the affair, to take his mind off it, he ought to invite a few friends for dinner and "laugh away the evening over a bottle of port or, if fond of cards, play a rubber of whist." If when retiring to bed sleep refuses to come he must "read some amusing book such as Byron's *Childe Harold*", leaving word with a trusty servant "to call him at five and provide a cup of strong coffee to be taken on rising." He should also "have been careful to secure the services of a medical attendant."

When the fateful morning arrives, he should "drink his coffee and take a biscuit with it, then wash his face and attend to bathing his eyes well in cold water." Then "having taken care not to disturb his wife or children he should set out for the duelling ground preferably in an anonymous post-chaise in case of molestation by the honorable members of Bow Street." (You will recall that Bow Street was the famous criminal court in London whose sleuths were known as the Bow Street Runners.)

The manual then continues to strongly advise the duellist that if on the way he should feel the slightest qualms he should "stop and take a little soda water flavored with a small wine-glass of brandy" which, the author adds, "I can strongly recommend as a most grateful stimulant and corrective."

Once arrived at the duelling ground and in place, the duellist is then advised to "cast his eyes closely upon his adversary and mark if there is any nervous tremulation in his movements" while he himself should remain "as still and firm as a statue."

Among other things it advises the duellist to select a specific target "such as one of the gilt buttons on his adversary's coat."

The writer then says, "I cannot impress on an individual too strongly the propriety of remaining perfectly calm and collected; when hit he must not allow himself to be alarmed or confused but, summoning all his resolution, treat the matter coolly; and if he dies go off with as good grace as possible."

* * *

I'm afraid that so far this talk on Duelling in Rhode Island (and elsewhere) has been almost entirely "elsewhere". But don't be discouraged: Rhode Island is coming. But before we reach Rhode Island I thought you'd like to hear about two famous American duels — one in the North and one in the South.

The northern case is a fascinating recent development in the saga of the famous duel between Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton in 1804. In the traditional story of this duel Burr is painted as the bad guy, gunning down Hamilton in cold blood after Hamilton had fired and missed — and Hamilton is pictured as the good guy tragically slain and gasping with his dying breath that he never intended to fire.

Two years ago it was discovered by a firearms specialist named Merrill Lindsay that the pistols used (which were furnished by Hamilton as was his right as the challenged party) had hidden hair-trigger mechanisms.

This discovery came about when Lindsay was commissioned by the Bicentennial Committee of Richmond to produce reproductions of these pistols for a bicentennial exhibit. For this purpose Lindsay had borrowed from the Chase-Manhattan Bank where it was stored the one original pistol that still remained in its original condition. He made his discovery when he dismantled it.

As many of you doubtlessly know, a hair-trigger mechanism could be pre-set by pushing the trigger slightly forward, which then enabled the holder to discharge it with a half-pound squeeze rather than the standard five-to-seven-pound pull — an inestimable advantage to a duellist.

Incidentally, the pistols used did not belong to Hamilton; he borrowed them from his brother-in-law Church even though he himself owned a fine pair of English duelling pistols.

This leaves a number of intriguing questions which will probably never be finally answered.

Did Hamilton know the Church pistols were hair-triggered? (I say "pistols" since if one was tampered with both had to be, as the seconds always determined which duellist was to be given which pistol.)

Was that why Hamilton specified the Church pistols instead of his own?

If Hamilton knew the secret, why didn't he take advantage of it by firing before Burr could squeeze his trigger?

Is it possible that Hamilton, if he knew, had not practiced sufficiently with the hair-trigger and so applied the light squeeze while still lowering his pistol to the horizontal? (Actually Hamilton's bullet lodged in a tree back of Burr.)

Was Hamilton's dying statement that he did not mean to fire intended to divert attention from any possible examination of the pistols?

No one knows the answers.

* * *

The southern one I have picked was quite probably the last American duel. It was fought on August 10, 1889 either in Georgia or Alabama (to this day no one is quite sure which).

The principals were Captain (an honorary Captain, that is) J. R. Williamson, President and majority owner of the Rome, Chattanooga and Columbus Railroad, and Patrick Calhoun, general counsel of the West Point Terminal Company of Atlanta.

It all began simply enough. At a meeting in Atlanta at which both were present an argument developed between them ending in a remark by Calhoun that Williamson had once asked him to become counsel for his railroad so that he could use him to unload it. Whatever their practices, railroad magnates didn't like to be talked about that way. Whereupon Williamson, his pointed mustache quivering, called Calhoun a liar.

That did it. Before the day was out a demand for retrac-

tion had been made and rejected and a challenge issued and accepted.

Williamson, as the challenged party, named Smith and Wesson pistols as the weapons, allotted five shots to each man and appointed as the meeting place Cedar Bluff, Alabama. The date was to be August 10, 1889.

In almost no time the word got out and the two Atlanta papers, the *Journal* and the *Constitution*, assigned picked squads of their ablest reporters to attend the affair with pencils at the ready to report it to a waiting world.

Word also reached the governors of Georgia and Alabama who were not amused. They saw their states held up to shame or — worse — ridiculed by horse-laughes. Both ordered their sheriffs to assemble posses and to have no hesitancy in arresting anyone who appeared to be involved.

Now came the fateful day. Being fully aware of the plans of the Press and the orders to the sheriffs, the parties decided on a game plan designed to outwit both. Two railroad lines connected Atlanta and Cedar Bluff. Calhoun was to take the southern Railway through Anniston. Williamson would take a Western and Atlanta train to Kingston where he would transfer to his private car. (It was *his* private car so why shouldn't he use it.)

Two of the Atlanta Constitution's ablest and most resourceful reporters having spotted Williamson and his party at the station in Atlanta boarded his train with him and when the group disembarked at Kingston the reporters sneaked on to Williamson's private car and concealed themselves. How-

ever, shortly after the train had passed through Rome, Georgia, they were discovered and — so the story reads — politely but firmly ejected.

But a little setback like that didn't faze them. Being only a little over a mile from Rome they trudged back there and put their plight before the editor of the local paper to whom they were well known. He, being a resourceful chap, rounded up for them a locomotive and an engineer and off they went in hot pursuit of Williamson. Since their friend hadn't been able to locate a fireman they had to shovel the coal themselves.

Quite soon they caught up with Williamson's private train which had stopped when his engineer, being unfamiliar with the line, refused to travel any further.

Whereupon, our intrepid reporters made a deal with Williamson. "If you'll let us ride with you we'll let you have our engineer," they said. Williamson had no choice but to agree.

Both trains, Calhoun's and Williamson's private car special, arrived almost together at the station of Cedar Bluff, Alabama. But hardly had everybody disembarked, including the principals, their seconds, the judges, the doctors and our resourceful reporters, than they were accosted by the local Sheriff who strode up to Calhoun and said, "You're Williamson." "I'm not." He then walked up to Williamson and said, "Then you're Calhoun." "I'm not." After a little more of this one of the reporters, one Edward Bruffey, fearful that the whole show might be called off, spoke up: "There's no use causing any more trouble. I'm Calhoun."

Whereupon the Sheriff, gun in hand, apprehended Bruffey and was about to haul him off when a local storekeeper said, "Hell, that ain't no Pat Calhoun. That's just good old Ed Bruffey."

And the whole affair was just about to start up again when Judge Tompkins, one of Williamson's party, had a brilliant idea. Said he to the Sheriff, "Don't you see this is a mail train? Don't you realize you hang for delaying the U. S. Mails?"

While the worthy Sheriff was thinking this one over, the whole party climbed aboard the regular train which took off, followed by Williamson's special.

A few miles out they stopped beside a field that seemed suitable for the encounter but hardly had they disembarked than they beheld the Sheriff, who was more resourceful than they thought, galloping toward them at the head of a posse of a dozen men armed with Winchesters.

Instantly one of the reporters yelled, "Everybody on the car!" and all hands scrambled aboard. As the special leaped forward the Sheriff, aiming his gun at the engineer, shouted "Stop That Train!"

By this time the engineer was warming up to the spirit of the occasion and sang out "Not Today" as he blew a derisive toot on his whistle and threw the throttle wide open.

After a few miles, when they were sure they had thrown off their pursuers, they stopped on a siding beside a wood-

land glade which the seconds promptly accepted as a suitable battleground. Whether this was in Alabama or Georgia nobody knew and, as I have said, to this day nobody knows.

Then, incredibly, a still further delay. The cylinder of one of the pistols would not revolve. Fearful once more that the battle might be cancelled, the resourceful Ed Bruffey — who had saved the day at the Cedar Bluff depot — offered his services but all he succeeded in doing was to blow off the tip of one of his own fingers. Whereupon he bravely remarked, “A finger don’t amount to anything. Go on.” And someone else fixed the balky pistol.

The great encounter then finally took place.

By now — due to the delays en route — it was getting dark and the moon could be seen.

You’ll remember the game plan called for five shots per man. Williamson thought this meant five shots all at once and fired his five, all of which missed. Calhoun had thought that the rules called for first one to fire one shot and then the other and so on. He fired one and also missed, and so had four left.

He then addressed Williamson, “I hold four bullets. Will you withdraw?” Answered Williamson, “I’m ready for your fire.”

Here Calhoun was faced with a frightful decision. Should he gun down his defenseless enemy?

He thought a minute: then slowly raised his pistol and

fired all four shots — one by one — into the sky and then said, “Now will you withdraw?”

Replied Williamson, “I gladly retract.”

Then they shook hands.

And so, boys and girls, *this* story has a happy ending.

Duelling in Rhode Island

Now — at long last — we're through with "elsewhere" and so here are the stories of five Rhode Island duels, being the only ones of which there seem to be any record.

To the credit of our glorious state, none of the participants in these affairs were Rhode Island men. All of them had come here to settle their differences and to escape the drastic anti-duelling laws of their own states, nearly all of which by the beginning of the Nineteenth Century treated duelling with fatal results as murder, punishable by death.

While Rhode Island today also treats fatal duels as murders (and even provides that lawyers engaging in duels may be disbarred), our laws in the early 1800's (when the Rhode Island duels I'm going to describe took place) provided only that "Every person who shall voluntarily and from malice, displeasure, fury or revenge engage in a duel by sword or pistol to the hazard of life, even though death does not result thereby, shall be carried publicly in a cart to the gallows with a rope about his neck and set thereon for the space of one hour, and may be imprisoned for a term not exceeding one year."

The first duel — which was a rather famous one at the time — was fought on March 31, 1806 between James Henderson Elliot of Boston and William Austin of Charlestown, Mass.

Elliot was a Federalist and a Harvard graduate. At the time of the duel he was 23 years old. Austin (then 28) — also a Harvard man — later was to become a distinguished lawyer and judge. He was a democrat.

Elliot thought his father, Major General Simon Elliot, had been wronged by a newspaper article written by Austin (under the assumed name of Decius) attacking him for his part in the court-martial of one Joseph Loring, an officer in the Massachusetts militia, who was a Democrat. The article asserted that even though the Court had acquitted Loring, General Elliot for political reasons withheld approval of the findings (thereby keeping Loring in jail) for several months.

Hence Elliot challenged Austin, suggesting Rhode Island as the site because of the drastic anti-duelling laws of Massachusetts.

The duel took place at Cold Spring in Providence. This was the area which is now the Constance Witherby Park between Pitman and Waterman Streets opposite the Salvation Army establishment.

This would have been a logical spot as the party coming from Massachusetts could have crossed the Seekonk on the Central Bridge which was located about where the recently defunct Red Bridge was.

(The Seekonk was then the Rhode Island-Massachusetts boundary. Rhode Island did not acquire what is now East Providence until 1862).

Austin's second was Charles Pinckney Sumner and Elliot's was Henry Sargeant, a distinguished portrait painter. Three shots were exchanged at ten paces (which was unusual since the articles of agreement called for only two shots to be exchanged). Austin was wounded — but not seriously — in the neck and thigh; Elliot was unharmed.

It is interesting to note the account of this battle in the Providence Phoenix of April 5th (five days after the affair) which reported it in boxing as it would have printed the box score of a baseball game.

Let me quote:

“The first round Mr. Austin’s pistol flashed.

Mr. Elliot fired and wounded Mr. Austin in the neck.

The second round they both fired and Mr. Austin was wounded in the thigh.

The third round had no effect.

The parties immediately retired from the field for Boston. We understood Mr. Austin’s wounds were not dangerous.”

You might almost have expected to see the story headlined Elliot 2 — Austin 0.

It was said that Austin later deeply regretted his part in the duel — which was not made known to his children till after his death.

The second affair took place at sunrise on July 14, 1827 on the Providence-Pawtucket turnpike about a mile from Pawtucket.

The challenge and acceptance had been made in Boston whence the parties with their seconds and surgeons had come by stage two days earlier.

The grounds for the quarrel are unknown, although it has been said that both of the parties were French (one said to have been a famous general).

The weapons were pistols at nine feet (a murderous distance compared with the normal ten paces). The firing was to be during the count of one to six by the seconds.

One nervously fired too quickly and missed. The other fired more deliberately and wounded his opponent in the left leg.

The party then returned to Blake’s Hotel in Pawtucket where the wounded man was treated by one Dr. Ira Burrows to whom he wryly remarked that his opponent was “one damn quick fellow.”

The unharmed duellist left the hotel almost immediately, proceeded to Providence and left on the morning boat for New York. His wounded opponent recovered in a couple of weeks and left for his home.

The third battle took place on December 16, 1832 at the unusual hour of three o’clock in the afternoon.

The parties again had come from Massachusetts in post chaises with their seconds and surgeons.

First stopping at a farmhouse, they asked whether they were in Rhode Island or Connecticut. On being informed that they were in Rhode Island they alighted, moored their horses and proceeded to a nearby field on the Cyrus Cook farm (about a quarter of a mile from Cumberland Hill and some

two miles from the state line).

There they began to remove their outer clothing — this was mid-December you will recall — when a reconnaissance by the seconds reported there were cows and a bull in the field.

With the alarming news that they risked being gored by a bull as well as being punctured by a bullet, they hastily grabbed their clothing and proceeded to a nearby hollow about 20 rods from the road.

Here they finished stripping to the waist (probably to eliminate the possibility of one of them wearing a bullet-proof vest).

Their seconds then placed them with their backs to each other at six paces distance and gave them their loaded pistols; whereupon, the younger of the two began to weep, which required two or three stiff snorts provided by his second until he was in shape to proceed.

At the word "Fire" they were to turn and shoot.

The word was given and both fired before they had fully turned. One bullet struck the ground; the other narrowly missed one of the seconds.

Fresh pistols were then given and the second who had been barely missed on the first exchange took the precaution of retreating behind a tree.

Once more the principals fired and missed, except that one of them shot himself in the leg.

This apparently satisfied honor and the party gathered up their discarded clothing — one duellist dressing himself and the other being dressed by the two seconds.

So hastily did they depart that one of the principals left his shirt on the field of honor to be taken as a trophy by a couple of boys who had viewed the whole affair.

The names of the duellists are not known; nor the cause of the quarrel.

The fourth affray took place on January 31, 1834 somewhere on the Moses Brown farm which then comprised in the neighborhood of 500 acres extending from Featherbed Lane (now Arlington Avenue) east to the Seekonk. Moses Brown's mansion was only a short distance north of what is now Wayland Square.

As the parties again came from Boston and returned there the same day, it is quite possible that they came across the Seekonk on the Central Bridge and that the Field of Honor was about where the Austin-Elliott duel had been fought back in 1806.

The original site selected had been Dedham but although one of the parties duly arrived there, seemingly the news got out of the impending battle and the other principal was arrested on his way and placed under \$10,000 bond to keep the peace. This necessitated other arrangements and Providence was chosen.

This time we know a little more about the parties and the quarrel.

The principals were Robert C. Hooper, Esq., a prominent Boston merchant, and Shocko Jones, Esq., a young gentleman from North Carolina then attending Harvard law School. His real name was Joseph — Shocko was the name of his hometown. Both moved in the highest Boston social circles.

As was seldom true, this encounter did involve alleged slurs on the honor of a lady — a Miss Marian Marshall, a then ravishing society beauty in Boston.

It was pistols again — this time at eight paces.

There are conflicting stories as to the outcome.

It seems to be clear that Shocko fired before the word was given and missed and that Hooper first took deliberate aim to avoid fatally wounding his opponent and then fired. One account says Hooper deliberately missed; another that he wounded Shocko in the thigh but not seriously.

In any event, Shocko claimed he was wounded and the entire party forthwith repaired to Boston where they arrived about half past eleven and stopped at the Tremont House — presumably to celebrate the happy outcome. This would seem to prove that Shocko, if wounded at all, was not seriously hurt. It would have been difficult — if not fatal — for him to have travelled some forty miles over rough roads with a serious wound in his thigh. Whether the lovely Miss Marshall attended the festivities is not known.

As I have said, this duel was fought on the Moses Brown Farm but whether Moses himself even heard of it seems doubtful. Had he learned of it he would have been horrified, as

the Quakers regarded duelling as an abomination. Further, Friend Moses was then in his 96th year.

As to the last duel of this series, very little is known. It took place in October, 1835 near Scott's Pond in Smithfield. The principals were naval officers who had come to Providence by boat from New York and thence by coach to the battle site. There seems to be no record of their names, the quarrel, the weapons or the result except it is said both men were wounded.

There you have the five known Rhode Island duels.

Actually there was a sixth which was "a duel that wasn't a duel." And it only barely qualifies as a Rhode Island duel since while the challenge and acceptance took place in Providence, the actual encounter was staged in Massachusetts, just the other side of the Seekonk, which — as I have said — was then the Massachusetts boundary.

It took place in March, 1857 and it should be borne in mind that by then Rhode Island as well as Massachusetts had drastic anti-duelling laws. So how better could the contestants have gone about to secure publicity — if that was what they had wanted — than for the procession of duellists and their seconds to have crossed and re-crossed the Seekonk toll bridge (as it was then) where the toll-keeper couldn't have helped noticing them.

But to return to the duel.

It all began at Brown University on a Saturday evening in the room of one Clarence Bates of Louisville, Kentucky,

at a soiree of undergraduates. The discussion — as it would today — centered round what is now called dating, then known as flirtation.

Suddenly, apparently without provocation, one Charles P. Williams, whose home was in New York, made a disparaging remark about Clarence Bates's current date. Young Bates dropped the fiddle on which he was playing the Arkansas Traveller, leapt to his feet and aimed a blow at Williams. As another student sprang up to separate them, Bates handed Williams his visiting card stating: "I demand of you, sir, the satisfaction of a gentleman and to refer any friend you may find to serve you to my friend Nelson here."

The challenge was accepted on the spot.

As might have been expected, the rumor of an impending duel ran widespread among the undergraduates resulting in an Episcopal minister — one Reverend Bancroft — appealing to the parties to "forego their deadly purpose" but to no avail.

Fearful that the Reverend would lose little time in informing Dr. Barnaby Sears — then President of Brown — the duel was hastily scheduled for dawn Monday morning.

At 5:30 in the morning the two principals with their seconds set out from the college in two buggies, crossed the Seekonk and proceeded to a clear spot in the woods near a farmhouse.

Again, as one might have suspected, the farmer, his wife, his three children, his hired man and hired girl all turned out

to see what was up.

What they saw was well worth the price of admission.

One of the foursome stepped off fifteen paces on the snow-covered ground and directed two of the others to take positions at each end of the line, handing to each a pistol. He then held out his handkerchief and said, "At the word three I shall drop my handkerchief and you will then fire."

"Gentlemen," he then shouted, "Are you ready? One! Two! Three!"

At the word "three" the handkerchief was dropped and both pistols were fired. The cap of one duellist (Williams) fell backwards off his head; the right arm of the other (Bates) fell to his side.

One pair, Williams and his second, immediately drove away. Bates's second, first bandaging his principal's arm, led him to his buggy which then followed the others. As the second buggy crossed the bridge, the toll-keeper distinctly heard one of the occupants groaning, "Oh my arm, Oh my arm."

The news was now general. All four of the parties (principals and seconds) were interviewed by reporters and lurid accounts of the affray were printed. Williams proudly displayed his cap with what he said was a bullet hole in it. Bates carried his right arm in a sling.

Things then took an unexpected turn.

A worthy citizen of Providence, one Mr. Burgess, out-

raged, in his words, "by such a high-handed attempt by Bates (the Kentucky student) to import into the liberty-loving North the barbarous customs of the slave-holding South" armed himself with affidavits from the toll-bridge keeper and the Massachusetts farmer who had witnessed the affair and set out by train for Boston to urge the Governor to request the Rhode Island authorities to extradite the dastardly duellists to Massachusetts to be properly dealt with.

Terrified that if they were taken to Massachusetts their stories would not be believed and that prison terms awaited them, the duellists and their "friends" confessed to President Sears that the whole affair from start to finish was a hoax, showing him that Bates's arm was as good as it had ever been and that that the bullet hole in Williams's cap had been manufactured by his poking his finger through it.

Seemingly the worthy Dr. Sears convinced the authorities that the students' story was true since the Massachusetts peace officers whom Mr. Burgess had brought from Boston returned empty-handed.

Although President Sears was amused by the story, he was not amused by the notoriety imposed on Brown since, according to Bronson's History of Brown, Bates, the southerner, who was apparently the ring-leader, was expelled and the other three suspended for varying terms.

And that's why I called this a duel that wasn't a duel.

* * *

Does duelling have a future?

"Unthinkable," you say, "except perhaps in Uruguay."

But it is a bold man who says anything is unthinkable in this computer age.

Let us suppose an exchange of heated remarks between two gentlemen in which the honor of one is impugned.

Let us suppose the traditional demand for retraction and its refusal, the challenge and its acceptance.

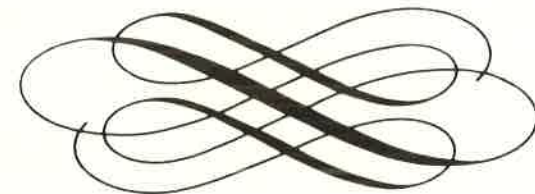
A computer is now programmed by the seconds — the input being the weapons, the number of shots, the distance between the duellists, their past records, their moral stamina and their reputations for steadfastness and bravery.

Then at the traditional crack of dawn, the button is pushed and the instant printout proclaims the result.

But will honor be satisfied?

Who knows?

Roger Tillinghast Clapp
December 14, 1977



REFERENCES

The Romance of Duelling: Steinmetz, 1868.

Pistols at Ten Paces, The Code of Honor in America: Stevens, 1940.

Gentlemen, Swords and Pistols: Kane, 1951.

The Duel: Baldrick, 1865.

Notes on Duels and Duelling: Sabine, 1855.

A Forgotten Duel (William Austin of Charlestown and James Henderson Elliot of Boston): Walter Austin.

William Austin: Robert Austin; 1925 (Ch. IV, The Austin-Elliot Duel).

Something of Men I Have Known: Adlai Stevenson, 1909 (Chap. X of The Code of Honor).

Smithsonian Magazine: Issue of November 1976 (pp. 94-98).

Encyclopedia Americana (Article on "Duel").

Duelling in Rhode Island (Transcript of Radio Talk on WJAR) by Jack Haley "The Rhode Island Historian", 1932.

Duelling in Rhode Island: The Hinterlander (Journal of the Western Rhode Island Civic Historian Society, Vol. 15, No. 9: Vol. 16, No. 1).

Memories of Brown: Edited by Robert P. Brown et al, 1909.

The History of Brown University: Bronson, 1914.

Memoirs of Popular Delusions (Chap. on "Duels and Ordeals") MacKay, 1841.