

The Jackson - Pearson Duel

The shock that the death of Alexander Hamilton in a duel with Aaron Burr in 1804 produced in the North had no counterpart in the South. Dueling not only continued in the South, but for a time increased both in frequency and in respectability. A visitor to South Carolina in 1819 learned that eleven of thirteen men whom he met at a social occasion had killed their man in duels. The same traveler, when he reached Kentucky, reported that "a lady of Lexington, finding her nephew not inclined to fight a duel, encouraged him to go out; and immediately on his departing for the fatal spot, said to her black servant, 'John, light up and get the large drawing room ready for the reception of a corpse.' This order was given with great sang froid; and in less than an hour, the room was occupied by the corpse of her nephew."¹ The duel was so popular that a former governor of South Carolina published a set of rules to follow in sending a challenge, selecting a second, and conducting the encounter on the dueling ground.²

The environment in which men found themselves caused fighting to become a code by which Southern men lived. Unlike the North, where compact communities fostered growth of group interdependence, the South had long stretches of uninhabited land, inadequate roads, and few towns of any size. The Southerner prolonged a frontier-type life, depending on his own resources for protection on lonely roads or in taverns in towns which lacked effective political institutions and civic responsibility. The male members of the stable portion of society, all of whom at an early age trained in the militia, organized extra-legal military groups to police their areas. "From this frontier atmosphere, a combination of monotony and conflict, emerged a tense, sensitive fighting man."³ He was quick to defend his exaggerated notions of personal honor which, as Mark Twain pointed out, sprang partly from the reading of Sir Walter Scott's tales of medieval heroes.

In the United States House of Representatives so many challenges followed remarks made in debates that the legislative body passed in 1796 a resolution "that if any member during a session challenged another member to fight a duel or if a member so challenged accepted the same, every such member would be held liable to be expelled from the House therefor."⁴ The resolution remained on the books to be ignored by Congressmen who made a site near Washington---Bladensburg, Maryland---one of the best known dueling grounds in the States.

In 1809 two Virginians---John George Jackson, a native of Clarksburg, and John Wayles Eppes, a native of City Point, near Petersburg---managed Administration strategy for President James Madison in the United States House of Representatives. Jackson was chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee; Eppes, Ways and Means. The two men, who were close friends, had been allied to the Executive Branch of the Government since the two had first entered the House of the Eighth Congress in 1803. Jackson had married a sister of Dolly Madison. He had lived in a boarding house in Washington on the corner of F and 15th Streets near the Treasury Building and a few doors away from the Madison residence, when James Madison was Secretary of State,

1 Faux, pp. 89-90; 300.

2 Wilson.

3 Franklin, p. 32.

4 Annals of Congress, Vol. 20, pp. 702-3.

at 1333-1335 F Street, N.W. Eppes had married Thomas Jefferson's daughter and had lived at the President's House while his father-in-law was President. Most Congressmen lived near the Capitol in boarding houses that catered to members of either the Federalist or Republican political parties.⁵

President Madison called Congress---which had repealed the Embargo Act in the last days of the Jefferson Administration and substituted a Non-Intercourse Act against Great Britain and France---soon after he had been inaugurated on March 4, 1809, to convene in special session on May 22, 1809. Madison assigned Jackson and Eppes to push through the House a clause---for insertion in the Non-Intercourse Act ---which would exclude foreign armed vessels from United States ports "except as admitted by treaty." Madison wanted the legislation to force Great Britain to revoke her Orders in Council (which allowed the British Navy to capture United States vessels at will) and sign a formal treaty rather than to rely on the vague Erskine Agreement which might have little effect. Administration Republicans wanted to vote and leave the humid Washington climate for their homes. Federalists and dissident Republicans, just as anxious to end the session, wanted to adjourn without passing Madison's proposal. To stall a vote on legislation, Federalists made long speeches commiserating with the thirty-six American citizens who having sailed with Miranda ---a soldier of fortune bent on freeing Venezuela from Spain---had been captured by Spanish authorities and lay in prison in South America. Joseph Pearson, a Representative from Salisbury, North Carolina, serving his first term, implied in his maiden speech before the House that Jefferson and Madison had been confederates of Miranda. Jackson immediately jumped up and said, "...I do not know the method of doing it, but I believe if there was any manner of bringing the gentlemen [Pearson] to the bar to exhibit and substantiate the charge, it ought to be done."⁶ That was his only reference to Mr. Pearson. The session adjourned on June 28 without enactment of a law to prohibit armed vessels from United States ports. Jackson returned to Clarksburg.

Jackson visited the Madisons at Montpelier in July, the month Reverend George Luckey wrote the President that disappointed Federalists were rushing into duels "with malice prepense and murder intended" whereby "we are in danger of losing some of our most valuable Republican members of Congress."⁷ When relations with Great Britain suddenly turned worse, Jackson hurriedly left Montpelier for Clarksburg to tend to business so that he could be in Washington for a special session of Congress Madison thought he might call early in the fall.

In August Jackson received a letter from Pearson citing a statement from the National Intelligencer that Jackson on the floor of the House had made "a groundless and slanderous charge" against Pearson. The North Carolinian demanded that Jackson direct the newspaper to correct the statement or Pearson would follow the course "which a man of honor is bound to pursue."⁸

Jackson did not take the threat lightly. He suspected the fourteen Federalist Representatives and the two Federalist Senators who boarded near the Capitol at Mrs. Wilson's Boarding House No. 2 with the thirty-three-year-old Pearson⁹ of having

6 Annals of Congress, Vol. 20, p. 279.

7 Brant, pp. 113-4.

8 Jackson mss. Lilly Library, Indiana University.

9 U. S. Congress. Congressional Directory.

planted imagined injuries in the mind of the new Congressman. Further proof of a Federalist plot was an attack published in a Baltimore newspaper in which Jackson was accused of pomposity and cowardice, although the last indictment, according to the newspaper, might be wrong since Jackson had appeared on the dueling ground when he had been challenged in 1804.¹⁰

Jackson could not let the threat of a duel force him into admitting something he did not recollect saying when it was agreed he had not said it. He wrote Mr. Pearson:

Clarksburg, Virginia
August 25, 1809

Sir:

By the mail of yesterday I received your letter of the 7th instant. The remarks attributed to me by the National Intelligencer to which you have called attention, were never used by me and the words I used are not now recollected distinctly: altho at the time my friend Mr. Eppes at my request reduced them to writing and furnished me with the paper. But hearing nothing further from you, I either destroyed it, or left it with other papers at Washington. I am unable to distinguish between the meaning of the words ascribed to me by the paper viz. "a groundless and slanderous charge" and a determination (as you and your friend understood me) to oppose "unfounded declamatory or unworthy charges" produced by your remarks and therefore if your letter were couched in a less offensive stile, and I had every disposition to terminate this affair to your satisfaction, I could not ask any correction by the editor.¹¹

Without warning, Pearson popped up in Clarksburg on Saturday, October 21, accompanied by a friend. He sent by his companion the next day a letter informing Jackson that he had received Jackson's reply of August 25 on September 17. Then followed the cryptic: "My friend Major Stephenson is authorized to make with you every necessary arrangement."¹²

Jackson called in his good Clarksburg friend---and a Federalist---James Pindall, named him his second, and talked over the strategy the two would use to get Jackson out of the corner into which he had been backed by Pearson. Cloistered at home, Jackson listed every piece of property he owned, every book in his library, and every piece of silver in his house.¹³ He wrote Dolly Madison on Monday: "Why, my dear Sister, do you distress yourself on my account and allow alarms of danger and of duels to reach you? Know you not that I live now only for my country¹⁴ and if in subserving its interest they cross my path, shall your Brother pusillanimously skulk into a corner? You must say no, my dear Sister, for I should be unworthy of the title you bestow on me if I acted thus."¹⁵

10 Florrie Jackson Needham Papers. In October 1804 William G. Payne challenged Jackson to a duel. Jackson accepted the challenge and appeared at the site outside Morgantown, Virginia (W. Va.) selected for the contest. The affair was settled just before the hour arrived for firing to begin.

11 Florrie Needham Papers.

12 Jackson mss. Lilly Library, Indiana University.

13 Meigs-Jackson Papers. Ohio Historical Society, Campus Martius Museum.

14 Jackson's wife, Mary Payne Jackson, had died in February 1808. His daughter Mary was cared for by Lucy Payne Washington who lived at Harewood near Charlestown, Virginia (W. Va.).

15 James Madison Papers. Alderman Library, University of Virginia.

Pindall and Stephenson met formally and carried messages to and from the principals. It was decided that the duel would be near Clarksburg instead of in Pennsylvania, where Pearson had suggested the encounter take place. They discussed weapons: Jackson demanded unsighted pistols; Pearson, sighted. Unable to reach an agreement as to sights, the duel was postponed. Pindall suggested that Mr. Jackson might consider himself discharged from further obligations to Pearson. Pearson disagreed.¹⁶ Pearson and Stephenson departed from Clarksburg.

Congress convened on November 27. Pearson renewed the challenge and the duel was set for December 4 at Bladensburg, Maryland. No record of the names of the seconds has been found. It would have been unwise politically for John Eppes to have served his friend, but Jackson and Eppes may have called on Thomas Mann Randolph, Jefferson's other son-in-law, to be the second, for Jackson said in a letter to Randolph in 1819 congratulating him on being named Governor of Virginia: "...my confidence in your gallantry, and friendship, was so strong as to place my life, and honor, in your hands."¹⁷ The seconds agreed on the following rules for the duel:

Distance ten paces.
To stand still until the word "make ready---fire".
The pistols until the word "fire" to be held pointing
above the head or below the feet of the adversary.
Time, tomorrow morning 8 or 9 o'clock.
A snap to be accounted a fire.
Place.
The word "fire" to follow in 1, 2, 3, or 4 seconds after
the word "make ready".
The parties shall not reserve fire but fire immediately
on receiving the word.¹⁸

Jackson wrote Dolly Madison on Sunday, December 3: "Farewell, my dear Sister, and say goodbye for me to my beloved friend Madison. He carries with him into the Presidency the most affectionate good wishes of my heart produced by an intimate acquaintance with his public and private virtues for nine years past; and I can say with great truth that not one single act of his life during the period I speak of has excited a momentary doubt as to its justice. If he does not guide the helm successfully, the requisite qualifications for that station cannot be found on earth."¹⁹

In the encounter Jackson received a bullet wound in the hip, a wound which after an infection developed would bring him near to death and would keep him confined to his living quarters in Washington until April 1810.²⁰ Pearson must have come through unscathed because he voted in the House on December 12.

Three days after the duel Ezekiel Bacon, a Republican from Massachusetts, on the floor of the House "held in his hands three propositions which he deemed it his duty to submit to the House...not for the regulation of the great concerns with foreign nations but for the necessary object of regulating themselves."²¹ They were the resolutions passed by the House in 1796 to stop dueling among members. Bacon moved that the resolutions be submitted to the Rules Committee. The members tabled the motion. Dueling continued to be a Congressional institution with Eppes challenging

16 Florrie Needham Papers

17 Jackson mss. Lilly Library, Indiana University.

18 Ibid.

19 Breckinridge-Watts Papers. (With the James Madison Papers, Alderman Library, University of Virginia).

20 Florrie Needham Papers.

21 Annals of Congress, Vol. 20, pp. 702-3.

Congressman John Randolph in 1811 to a duel settled without a fight.²² Not so with the challenge of Secretary-of-State Henry Clay after Senator John Randolph in 1826 had criticized Clay's handling of foreign affairs. In the duel that followed both men on the first fire discharged pistols without effect; on the second fire Clay missed and Randolph discharged into the air.²³

John George wasn't the last member of the Jackson family to be challenged to a duel. In 1852 James A. Walker, a senior at the Virginia Military Institute, challenged Professor T. J. (Stonewall) Jackson---a son of John George's first cousin, Jonathan---to a duel because he claimed to have been insulted by a remark made to him by the professor. The court martial and dismissal of Walker from the Institute relieved the professor of having to make the decision to accept or reject the challenge.²⁴

Duelling disappeared from the American scene at the time of the Civil War.

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22 Bailey, p. 79.

23 Franklin, P. 51.

24 Freeman, V. 2, pp. 703-4.