

A DUEL IN ARLINGTON

By
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In 1826, in what is now Arlington, a noted duel took place, not far from the Virginia end of Chain Bridge. The duelists were Secretary of State Henry Clay and United States Senator John Randolph of Roanoke. Interesting and varying written accounts tell of the event.

Certain remarks on Executive Powers, made by Randolph before the Senate on March 30, 1826, were taken as an insult by Clay, and he called Randolph out in a duel. General Jessup, who was to be one of Clay's seconds, delivered the challenge to Randolph. Efforts by friends to smooth over the inuendos of Randolph that so inflamed Clay were futile, and arrangements were made for the duel.

Saturday, April 8, 1826, at half past four o'clock in the afternoon was fixed as the time for it; a spot in a dense forest on the Virginia side of the Potomac above the Little Falls Bridge (now Chain Bridge), as the place. Pistols were to be the weapons, the distance was to be ten paces, each party was to be attended by two seconds and a surgeon. There was to be no practicing.

It was at the wish of Randolph that the duel would take place in Virginia. If he fell, he wished to fall on the soil "endeared to him by every tie of devoted loyalty and affection."

General Jessup, and Senator Josiah S. Johnston, of Louisiana, were Clay's seconds; Colonel Tattnal, a congressman from Georgia, and General James Hamilton, of South Carolina, were the seconds for Randolph.

The night before the duel, Mr. Randolph went for General Hamilton. Randolph seemed very calm, and remarked, "Hamilton, I have determined to receive, without returning, Clay's fire; nothing shall induce me to harm a hair of his head; I will not make his wife a widow, or his children orphans. Their tears would be shed over his grave; but when the sod of Virginia rests on my bosom, there is not in the wide world one individual to pay this tribute upon mine."

Randolph's friends tried to persuade him to change his mind about not returning Clay's fire, but their attempts were in vain, although he remarked that "If I see the devil in Clay's eye and that with malice prepense he means to make my life, I may change my mind."

An account of the actual duel, according to William Cabell Bruce, follows:

"At the appointed time and place, the ground was marked off for the duel. The principals saluted each other courteously, as they took their places on an east and west line, in a little depression; Clay just in front of a small

stump; Randolph just in front of a low gravelly bank. On handing Randolph his pistol, Colonel Tattnal sprung the hair-trigger. Randolph said, 'Tattnal, although I am one of the best shots in Virginia, with either a pistol or gun, yet I never fire with a hair-trigger; besides, I have a thick buckskin glove on which will destroy the delicacy of my touch, and the trigger may fly before I know where I am.' But from his solicitude for his friend, Tattnal insisted upon hairing the trigger. When the two principals took their positions, Randolph's pistol went off with the muzzle down, before word was given. Seeing this, Colonel Jessup, Clay's friend, called out that he would instantly leave the field with Clay if this happened again, but Clay with noble generosity asserted it was clearly an accident. Another pistol was handed to Randolph, and an exchange of shots between Clay and Randolph followed. Randolph's bullet struck a stump behind Clay, and Clay's knocked up the earth and gravel behind Randolph."

"The pistols were reloaded, and Clay's shot knocked up the gravel behind Randolph, as his first shot had done. Randolph raised his pistol and fired in the air, and exclaimed, 'I do not fire at you, Mr. Clay,' and immediately advanced and tendered his hand to Clay. Clay, in the same spirit, met him halfway, and the two shook hands, Randolph, whose coat skirt had been pierced by Clay's bullet very near the hip, saying jocosely, 'You owe me a coat, Mr. Clay,' and Clay promptly and very happily replying, 'I am glad the debt is no greater.'"

The Code Duello version of the duel:

"They met next day at 4 p.m., on the banks of the Potomac. Randolph saw no devil in Clay's eyes, but a man fearless and expressing the mingled sensibility and firmness which belonged to the occasion. It was a deeply affecting scene. The sun was just setting. Here were two extraordinary men about to meet in mortal combat. While Tattnal was loading Randolph's pistol, Hamilton approached his friend and took his hand, which was perfectly steady. Randolph said to him: 'Clay is calm but not vindictive. I hold my purpose. Remember this.' When the pistol was handed him by Tattnal with the hair trigger sprung he said, 'Tattnal, although I am one of the best shots in Virginia, I never fire with a hair trigger.' But his second insisted on this being done, as it was part of the cartel. When the two principals took their positions, Randolph's pistol went off with the muzzle down before the word was given. Seeing this, Col. Jessup, Clay's friend, called out that he would instantly leave the field with Clay if this happened again. Clay remonstrated with Jessup, saying it was only an accident. The next time Clay fired without effect, whereupon Randolph discharged his pistol in the air. Clay then took in the situation, and going over to Randolph exclaimed: 'I trust in God, my dear sir, you are untouched; after what has occurred I would not have harmed you for a thousand worlds.' Then ensued a cordial reconciliation. Randolph's magnanimity in this affair won him many friends."

The account of the duel in *John Randolph*, by Henry Adams, is somewhat different:

“On April 8, 1826, they exchanged shots, and Clay’s second bullet pierced the folds of the white flannel wrapper which Randolph, with his usual eccentricity, wore on the field. Randolph threw away his second fire, and thereupon offered his hand, which Clay could not refuse to accept.”

DUELING GROUND LOCATION

Dorothy Ellis Lee, writing about Walker Chapel Methodist Church in *A History of Arlington County, Virginia*, says:

“The building stands in an interesting spot historically, for it is only a short distance from an old dueling ground where many duels were fought, the most famous being the one between John Randolph of Roanoke and Henry Clay. The church is on Glebe Road about a mile from Chain Bridge. It is near Fort Ethan Allen.”

Three days after the duel, an article in the *Alexandria Gazette* of Tuesday, April 11, 1826, mentioned the duel, but gave no exact location, merely stating “they met on the grounds . . .”

General Hamilton, one of Randolph’s seconds in the duel, described the site only as “on the banks of the Potomac.”

Eleanor Lee Templeman, in *Arlington Heritage, Vignettes of a Virginia County* (p. 54), says, “An incidental consequence of the opening of the Falls Bridge was the development of a dueling ground on Pimmit Run near the Virginia end of the bridge. Just back of the tumbling palisades, the stream meanders through a broad secluded meadow. Here in 1826, Henry Clay, Secretary of State, and John Randolph of Roanoke, Senator from Virginia, vented their malice in a bloodless duel. Clay’s bullet pierced the ample folds of Randolph’s dressing gown but missed the flesh. Randolph fired into the air. The astonished antagonists embraced each other, rejoicing that neither was injured!”

Harry Gutshall, in his “Reminiscences of the Walker Chapel Area,” in mentioning Fort Marcy (the Civil War fort upriver from Fort Ethan Allen, across the Pimmit Run valley), says, “Right near the fort was fought a duel between Henry Clay and John Randolph. The dueling ground is just to the north of the fort, probably 50 or 75 feet.”

From practical geographical considerations of the area, I believe that Mr. Gutshall meant to say that the dueling ground was 50 or 75 feet *south* of Fort Marcy, instead of *north*. This would put it in the approximate area of the glade described by Eleanor Lee Templeman, back of the Pimmit Run palisades, where the stream becomes quite gentle. It could be that the description of the position of John Randolph on the line of duel as “Randolph just in front of a low gravelly bank” refers to the north bank of Pimmit Run in the meadow.

One hundred and fifty-five years after the 1826 duel, and without documented references, ascertaining the exact location of a small plot of unmarked ground in an unsettled area is probably impossible, but the physical features of the terrain seem to lend credence to the theory that the dueling ground was indeed in the meadow above the Pimmit Run palisades.

SOURCES

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