

DUELING MASONS¹

Presented by Fred O. Wyant

As Masons and Brethren, we sometimes have our differences, which at times may result in rather heated discussions. However, two hundred years ago, at the beginning of the 18th Century, the "Gentlemen's Code of Honor" at times resulted in dispute participants resorting to duels to settle their differences. We Masons today have a different code, but sometimes our disputes between Brothers seem to have as little reason as those resulting in deadly duels did then.

A duel by one who has assumed the obligations of the fraternity is difficult to understand. Yet, not only did Masons engage in duels, they sometimes challenged and fought those bound to them by the close ties of the fraternity. Indeed, it was often the "intellectuals" more than any other class, who conducted such affairs of honor! Some things have indeed changed during the ensuing years.

In the year 1812, a challenge to a duel passed between two Master Masons in Kentucky, the challenge being borne by a third Master Mason. The bearer of the challenge was tried by his Lodge and was suspended for one year for violation of the Masonic covenant, as it appeared he had made no attempt to reconcile the duelist's differences. He appealed the suspension to the Grand Lodge of Kentucky, where following an elaborate report by a special committee the sentence of his lodge was set aside. Not withstand this action, the brother was called before the Grand Lodge to receive censure from the Grand Master on the impropriety of his conduct. The committee admitted that it was entirely improper for Master Masons to challenge or convey a challenge to a Master Mason, citing the principle that brothers should live together in harmony. They added that it was their belief that the brother thought he was acting properly, "the course pursued by Masons; heretofore, in similar cases, without incurring censure of animadversion², goes far to extenuate the offense."

Four years later, the Grand Master who presided on this occasion, emboldened perhaps by this decision, was himself in a duel with another mason, a Past Master of a lodge in his home town! Both participants were called before the Grand Lodge in 1818 to answer for having engaged in a duel. Both parties responded and after deciding it had jurisdiction, a well-known member, statesman and orator, Henry Clay, presented a resolution for a committee to attempt to affect an reconciliation of the adversaries. He and another member were appointed to the committee and speedily reported back that they had been successful and the matter had been resolved. However, this did not end the discussion, as another member of the Grand Lodge presented a resolution to expel both participants from the fraternity! This motion was subsequently tabled, and the following day, Henry Clay

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all references are from "Territorial Masonry," by Ray Vaughn Denslow, published by The Masonic Service Association of the United States, copyright 1925, and republished by the Missouri Lodge of Research in 1990.

² A critical, especially unfavorable, comment, on or about something, or the act of criticizing adversely.

presented a substitute resolution deploring the idea of dueling and noting that the brothers involved had been "perfectly reconciled." It then concluded that, "...the said brothers should be suspended from the privileges of Masonry during pleasure of this Grand Lodge." This resolution was adopted. Ten years later, a Master Mason was restored to Masonic standing by the Grand Lodge; the other participant had died some time previously.

We might note here that Henry Clay had himself engaged in a duel with Humphrey Marshall in 1808.

In Indiana, the first Mason raised in that jurisdiction and the first to receive Masonic burial, was the victim of a duel. Parmenas Beckes, was an inn-keeper, popular, and one-time sheriff of his county. He had fought in the battle of Tippecanoe and met his death at the hand of a Dr. Scull. The trivial cause was a statement by Scull concerning Beckes step-daughter, "If she was as good as she is pretty, she would be a jewel." Beckes issued a challenge and the duel took place near Vincennes, Illinois. At the first shot, Beckes missed, and Scull, said to be reluctant to fight, fired into the air. A reconciliation was sought, but Beckes refused. The distance was ten paces and the second time, both participants fired together. Beckes was hit in the right side and died; Scull was again unwounded. He arranged his affairs and left the country.

The first recorded duel west of the Mississippi was that between Dr. Bernard G. Farrar and James A. Graham. Farrar was a Freemason and the first American physician in the vicinity of St. Louis. Farrar was at first merely the bearer of the challenge, but Graham refused to accept it on the grounds that the issuer, "was not a gentleman." By the code of the day, Farrar then became a principal. The duel was fought on "Bloody Island" in the Mississippi River, a later scene of many duels. Graham was severely wounded and never fully recovered, dying a year later on a trip East. His estate was administered by Robert Wash, a member of Missouri Lodge No. 1.

In 1816, Captain Henry S. Geyer and George Hancock Kennerly had a "trifling misunderstanding," the code was invoked and another duel was fought on Bloody Island. At the second firing, both having missed the first time, Kennerly was wounded in the knee. He was crippled for some years but survived; subsequently, he and Geyer became fast friends and delighted in recounting together their youthful follies. Geyer is known to have been a member of the fraternity.

One of the better known duelists was Senator Thomas Hart Benton, a member of Missouri Lodge No. 1. While at Nashville, Tennessee as a Lt. Col. in the 39th Infantry, he became embroiled with Andrew Jackson, later President, in a well-publicized altercation where several pistols were fired by a number of participants. Some shots were at such a close range as to result in powder burns on clothing. General Jackson was injured but recovered. One of Jackson's friends drew a knife and slashed Benton five times. No one was killed, but it must have been quite an affair – as Benton wrote it. Later, he and Jackson became friends and as a United States Senator, Benton was a close supporter of President Jackson.

The one dark spot in Senator Benton's life was his duel with Charles Lucas. Benton did not issue the challenge, but it was said that his overbearing way brought on the trouble. Lucas stated in writing prior to the duel that cause was his asking Benton if he had paid the poll tax in time to enable him to vote. Benton then applied "abusive and ungentlemanly language" to Lucas and the challenge was issued. At the first meeting, both participants were wounded, Lucas in the neck and Benton below the knee. Lucas was too hurt to continue and stated that he was satisfied. Benton, however, demanded they meet again. Ten days later, they did, and this time Lucas was killed. He was only 25 years old and left a young family. The sympathy of the community was with his family and his father remained a bitter enemy of Benton until his death. In later years, Benton lobbied against dueling; by the time he died, the custom had ceased throughout the United States.

Another prominent Masonic duelist was Andrew Buckner, first Master of Unity Lodge No. 6 of Jackson, Missouri, but at the time of the duel, he was Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Indiana. In fact he was the first Grand Master of Indiana, subsequently removing to Missouri. He was later a United States Senator from that State. It appears the duel came about because one of the duelists assaulted the other; the subsequent duel apparently resulted in no damage to either participant. Buckner died a natural death in Missouri in 1833. A committee was appointed by Vincennes Lodge No.1 to investigate, and a report was issued. No action was ever taken on the report of the committee, perhaps because Buckner was moving shortly to Missouri.

Shadrach Bond, the Governor Elect of Illinois, was challenged to a duel by Rice Jones. They met and Jones' pistol prematurely fired, it having a hair trigger. Bond was then entitled to a "free" shot at Jones but refused, thus ending the duel. However, Bond's second, one Dunlap, became embroiled in an argument with Jones and later killed Jones on the streets of Kaskaskia. Dunlap escaped to Texas and was never apprehended. He was thought to be a Dr., formerly a member of St. Paul's Lodge No. 54 of New York and a member of Western Star Lodge No. 107, Louisiana, Missouri, which expelled him in 1813. Bond later became the first Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Illinois.

Not all duels ended badly. The Honorable Hamilton H. Gamble, later to be Governor of Missouri and Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Missouri, was slated to be a second in a duel between a young man named French and another who's name is lost to the record. The party rode horseback to the town of Louisiana, Missouri near where the duel was to be held. Wearied with the trip, they stopped at an old hostelry and "sought rejuvenation in that elixir that either makes friends or enemies of those who touch glasses. They stood elbow to elbow and man to man as the glasses clicked together; and as their hearts warmed their hands clasped in friendship, and the duel was indefinitely postponed."

And the chapter concludes, "Verily, 'All's well that ends well.'"