“The Barbarous Custom of DUELING”

Death and Honor on St. Louis’ Bloody Island

BY MARK NEELS

For the student of the Antebellum South, the drama is a familiar one. Two men, most likely prominent members of society, have an argument. One man publicly insults the other. Perhaps the altercation becomes physical. The victim of the assault feels that his pride is injured, and later sends a close confidant to the home of the assailant to demand an apology. When one is not forthcoming, the matter is settled between the two men on “the field of honor.” Such was the story of the American duel—an occasion occurring countless times throughout Antebellum America, and one that earned an otherwise useless sandbar, directly opposite the city of St. Louis, the nickname

(Above) Even as late as the eve of the Civil War, dueling was still a method of settling political disputes in California, as seen here in a depiction of the Broderick-Terry duel in 1859. But even then, the *Code Duello* was followed. In this case, the mortally wounded David Broderick became something of a martyr after his deathbed claim that “They killed me because I was opposed to the extension of slavery and the corruption of justice.” (Photo: State Historical Society of Missouri Photo Collection)

(Below) Since it was in neither Illinois nor Missouri, the wooded sandbar island in the Mississippi River became the site for St. Louis’ most notorious duels, earning it the name “Bloody Island,” as seen on this map. Today’s Poplar Street Bridge spans the south edge of the site. (Photo: State Historical Society of Missouri Photo Collection)

"Bloody Island." Situated between the state boundaries of Illinois and Missouri, for over fifty years Bloody Island was the setting for altercations between some of the most famous people in the history of the region and the nation.

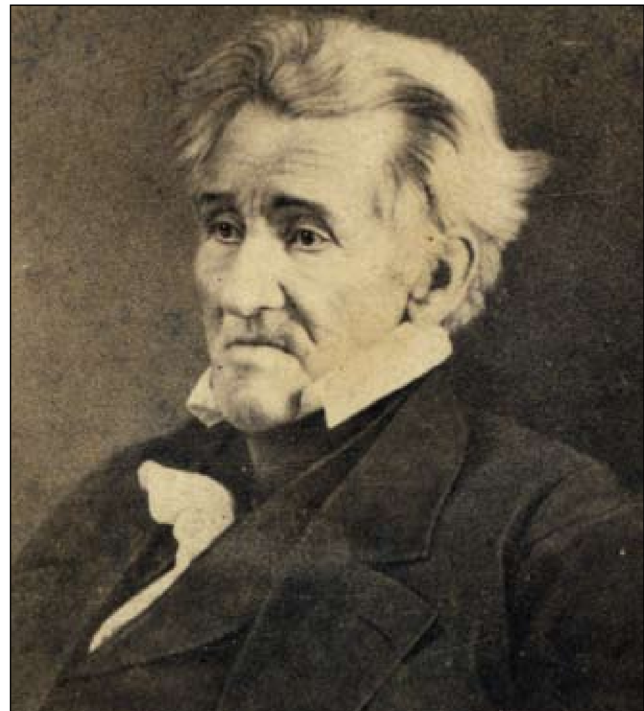
By the mid-nineteenth century, St. Louis had achieved status as a bustling river city with a blossoming commercial district extending some nine or ten city blocks west from the riverfront; west of the commercial district began the residential area.[1] Presumably, citizens living there would rise with the dawn and travel the few miles to the commercial center, where they would practice their trades. And while the residential area was surrounded by large, open, dispersed plats of land, the denseness of the commercial district clearly indicated the importance of river transportation to the city's economic prosperity. Located in the river, halfway between Illinois and Missouri not far from this center of commerce, was Bloody Island.[2]

Along with the occasional violent encounter with their Native American neighbors, St. Louisans also suffered from the volatile nature of frontier politics. "In Missouri, lawyers, judges, politicians, and newspaper editors competed to be recognized as frontier aristocrats and found themselves forced to abide by the rigid gentleman's code of honor."[3] The "code of honor"—dueling—began in the Old World. According to British historian Jeremy Horder, "In England the practice of duelling, private combat *suel a suel* upon a point of honour, was engaged in with more or less vigour from the latter part of the sixteenth until well into the nineteenth century."[4] Possibly the most famous testament to the practice of duelling was a set of guidelines drafted by a group of Irishmen entitled the *Code Duello*. Written down in 1777, this compilation of 26 steps answered questions such as how many shots should be fired by principals for certain offenses. Step IX, for example, stated that if a person was cheated during a card game, satisfaction could be achieved after the exchange of a single shot. Step VII, however, dictated that satisfaction for a physical assault required firing no fewer than two shots. Never mind that the first shot might be all that was needed to incapacitate an opponent![5]

Soon, the *Code Duello* was in use throughout most of the English-speaking world. Following the War for Independence, Americans adapted the *Code Duello* for a whole new generation of American aristocrats. In 1838, former South Carolina governor John Lyde Wilson—himself a champion of the duel—even printed a revised *Code Duello* for future generations. Although it is not clear whether any of the participants actually read Wilson's text, it is this set of revised guidelines that most of the St. Louis duels followed. Entitled *The Code of Honor or Rules for the Government of Principals and Seconds in Duelling*, Wilson's text attempted to provide a more detailed set of guidelines than the original *Code Duello*—encompassing every foreseeable situation that might culminate in a duel. Consequently, the *Code of Honor* provided an entirely new section dictating the actions of seconds in transmitting a challenge (such as commanding seconds to attempt, if possible, to *prevent* principals from demanding satisfaction), paired down the *Code Duello's* list of acceptable reactions to various insults, and spelled out the proper actions of principals and seconds on the actual field of honor. Noticeably absent from both the original *Code Duello* and the later *Code of Honor* is any mention of principals standing back-to-back and then counting out the distance in steps before firing at one another as we often picture them from popular culture. This melodramatic scene appears to be mainly legend—used to provide a sense of drama in retellings—and probably only occurred in European duels.[6]

Duelling was no stranger to American politics. As the 1804 confrontation between Federalist Party leader Alexander Hamilton and Vice President Aaron Burr attested, some duels had long-lasting national consequences.[7] On the frontier, the advancement of a man's political career sometimes *depended* on his prowess on the dueling ground. This perhaps explains why so many duels involved men of high society. According to historian Ryan Dearinger, "Superior status did not automatically transfer from the regions of provenance, but had to be earned all over again on the frontier."[8] As such, up-and-coming elites in frontier society were unwilling to suffer any setbacks to their prospective fortunes—if they had the ability to control them—and therefore saw the protection

The election of Andrew Jackson (1767-1845) to the presidency in 1828 represented a shift in American politics. Not only did far more people vote in the election, but Jackson was also the first president from the rough-and-tumble West, which included a reputation for violence, heroism, and dueling. (Photo: State Historical Society of Missouri Photo Collection)



of honor in association with the protection of their own futures.

The underlying emotions that culminated in duels were not class-exclusive. A lower-class man was just as interested in protecting his honor as an elite. Still, it was the wealthy that were more likely to settle disputes through duels (a type of combat that historian Bertram Wyatt Brown called "a prescribed form" of violence). "Just as lesser folk spoke ungrammatically," Brown explained, "so too they fought ungrammatically, but their actions were expressions of the same desire for prestige."[9] While the lower class man defended his honor by demonstrating his strength in a brawl, those from the upper classes were compelled to prove their worthiness by participating in a more elaborate display of refined violence.[10] Indeed, Andrew Jackson, arguably the most prominent western politician of his age, fought several duels before he was elected president. He was no stranger to street brawls, either—giving credence to Jackson's later claim to be a true man of the people. One such brawl occurred in Nashville in 1813 between General Jackson and his subordinate, future Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton.

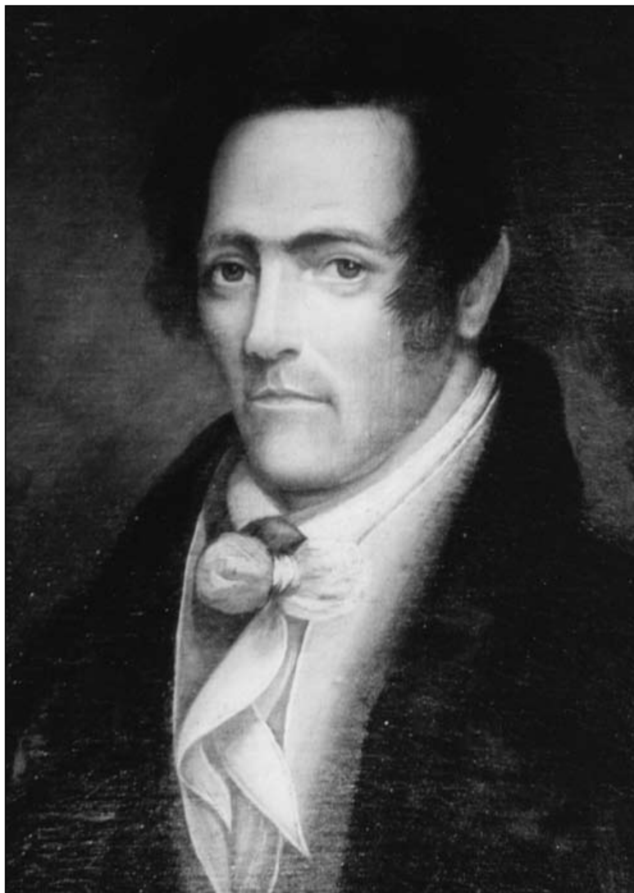
Benton discovered that Jackson had been second in a duel that resulted in the humiliation of Benton's brother, Jesse. In an effort to recover his brother's honor, then-Colonel Benton resigned his commission in the army and publicly denounced Jackson's character. No one insulted Andrew Jackson—especially not in public. Seeing the Benton brothers exit a building on a Nashville street a few weeks later, Jackson lunged at Thomas, chasing him back into the building. Jesse, preceding his brother inside, turned on Jackson as the general crossed the threshold and shot him in the upper arm. After Jackson's friends joined the fray, Thomas was knocked down a flight of stairs. No one was killed in the altercation, but Jackson carried the bullet in his arm for the rest of his life, and the affair served as an example of how the defense of a man's honor could command his interactions with others.[11]

Just as the Nashville incident was not Jackson's last violent encounter, so too it was not the last for Thomas Hart Benton. Fearing that Jackson's newfound national popularity after the Battle of New Orleans would lead to further retribution from the general and his allies, Benton left Nashville in 1815. Landing in St. Louis, it was only a matter of time before he once more revealed his rugged frontier character.[12] Just a year later, Benton was involved as a second in a duel between St. Louis attorneys Thomas Hempstead and Joshua Barton. In a bloodless confrontation, both parties met on Bloody Island on August 10, 1816, and fired their weapons, but failed to meet their mark. The two "principals," having achieved satisfaction, shook hands and promised each other no further ill will.[13]

It was not at all rare for duels to end peaceably. Indeed, aside from a few scrapes and bruises, Benton had emerged unscathed from his altercation with Jackson. And even though Jackson had taken a bullet in his upper arm, he too lived through the ordeal. The case of the Barton-Hempstead duel, however, illustrates how bloodless duels could be detrimental to a man's reputation and career. So that the personal honor of Hempstead and Barton would not be called into question, both Benton and Edward Bates, a successful St. Louis attorney who served as Barton's second, drafted and signed an account of the duel in which they swore "that the conduct of both gentlemen was perfectly honorable and correct."[14] Testimonials by the seconds in a duel were not unusual. The records of most of the confrontations included such accounts. In the case of the Benton-Bates testimonial, having two successful and professional men attest to the honorable actions of both Barton and Hempstead also assured that no further duels resulted from future accusations of cowardice.

None of Benton's subsequent duels ended so smoothly. One year later, Benton—now himself a prominent attorney—became involved, first hand, in another public quarrel. Benton had recently come out in support of St. Louis property owners in their struggle against Judge Charles Lucas, who questioned whether land

The promising life of Joshua Barton (1792-1823), an attorney who was Missouri's first Secretary of State, ended early when he died instantly in a duel on Bloody Island. It wasn't his first experience, though. His first duel ended without harm against Thomas Hempstead, whose second was future Senator Thomas Hart Benton. He and Benton nearly met again a year later, in 1817, when he was a second to Charles Lucas, who was killed in his duel with Benton. (Photo: State Historical Society of Missouri Photo Collection)



Before moving to St. Louis, Senator Thomas Hart Benton (1782-1858) was something of a noted duelist. He wounded Andrew Jackson in 1813, and was either a principal or a second in several duels in St. Louis, including one in which he mortally wounded fellow lawyer Charles Lucas, Jr. (Photo: State Historical Society of Missouri Photo Collection)

claims made while St. Louis was under Spanish rule could be recognized under United States jurisdiction. A conflict between Benton and Lucas' son, Charles, Jr., erupted while both were opposing counsel in a land case. In the St. Louis Circuit Court, Lucas accused Benton of intentionally misstating the truth in order to achieve a ruling in his favor. Benton, in response, accused Lucas of publicly defaming him in front of their colleagues at the bar—an accusation not dissimilar to the one General Jackson made against Benton three years earlier.[15]

While Benton demanded satisfaction, cooler heads prevailed and nothing came of this initial confrontation. However, the nature of their occupations as attorneys forced Benton and Lucas into frequent contact. Persons so opposed to one another, professionally and personally, were bound to come to blows eventually. On Election Day 1817, Lucas suggested to his close associates that Benton was not qualified to vote because he had failed to pay his taxes. Learning of Lucas' accusation, Benton dismissed it, saying that he was not about to allow some young "puppy" to "cross [his] path."[16] On August 11, a letter arrived from Lucas at Benton's residence. "I am informed you applied to me the day of the election the [insult] 'Puppy,'" wrote Lucas. "If so I shall expect that satisfaction which is due from one gentleman to another for such an indignity."[17] Benton promptly accepted the challenge.

On August 12, both men, their seconds, and two surgeons rowed out to Bloody Island; even then a fairly large sand bar covered with small cotton trees and shrubbery. At a distance of thirty feet, Benton and Lucas took aim at one another and fired their pistols. Benton was hit in the knee, while Lucas received the more painful wound of a ball through the throat. The wound was not mortal, however, and while Lucas claimed that satisfaction was achieved, Benton demanded that the pistols be reloaded for another shot.[18]

Why Benton was not satisfied with the wound he had inflicted on his opponent is unknown. However, by

In 1817, Thomas Hart Benton shot and killed Lucas in a duel on Bloody Island. This is a photo of Benton's dueling pistol, used in Lucas' demise. (Photo: State Historical Society of Missouri Photo Collection)

The St. Louis levee from Illinois near the site of Bloody Island, c. 1847. By the time dueling ended in St. Louis, the city was a thriving commercial center. (Photo: State Historical Society of Missouri Photo Collection)

recalling his previous visit to the dueling grounds during the Barton-Hempstead duel of a few years previous, a likely reason can be surmised. As revealed by the testimonial from that duel—which Benton co-wrote—duelists who walked off the field of honor (regardless of the wounds they suffered) struggled afterwards to guarantee their honor in the minds of those who were not witness to the actual event. Perhaps Benton did not fully trust the testimony of his second, and felt that more was needed to ensure his honor.

Regardless of his motives, Benton was eventually persuaded to retract his demand. Lucas, however, failed to let matters rest. A few weeks later, he circulated a rumor that, instead of being politically motivated, Benton's flight from Tennessee was actually an escape from criminal charges. In response, Benton renewed his demand for justice. Replying to this second challenge, Lucas professed his innocence and suggested that the accusations attributed to him were more likely the fabrications of Benton's close friends and allies. "A respectable man in society cannot be found who will say that he ever heard any of the reports alluded to from me," wrote Lucas. "I think it more likely they have been fabricated by your own friends than circulated by any who call themselves mine." Nonetheless, because Benton had presented a formal challenge, Lucas concluded, "I shall give you an opportunity of gratifying your own wishes or the wishes of your news carriers."[19]

On September 27, after retracing their previous route to the dueling ground, both men faced off at the more dangerous distance of ten feet. This time, Benton's bullet was more accurate, piercing Lucas's heart, killing him instantly and silencing him forever.[20]

In the following decades, duels such as those already described became common occurrences on Bloody Island. This increasing streak of violence pressed lawmakers to outlaw "the barbarous custom of dueling" and charge murder on any person who killed another in the name of honor.[21] Unfortunately, the statute had little effect. Bloody Island existed in the "no man's land" between Illinois and Missouri. Regardless of its proximity to the Missouri side, the island remained outside of the state's jurisdiction, and this loophole in the anti-dueling statute paved the way for the most devastating duel in St. Louis history.

The more duels that occurred on Bloody Island, the more sensational they became. By the late 1830s, duels in St. Louis were citywide events. With the greater part of St. Louis society eagerly following reports of these quarrels in the local papers, the stakes in affairs of honor grew higher than ever before. Why did society at large become so interested in these duels? It was not uncommon in an age when political contests were reported with colorful description in the local papers for the local population to serve in what Brown described as, "a Greek chorus in [a] Sophoclean drama."[22] The intricate process

by which satisfaction was sought, and the dramatic steps (almost stage directions) by which the duel was followed were as entertaining as anything likely to be seen on the stage. In some ways, these altercations—with their public displays of bravado and melodrama—resembled scenes straight out of *Hamlet* or *MacBeth*.

In some cases, violent interactions on the St. Louis dueling ground even attracted national and international attention. In *American Notes for General Circulation,* novelist Charles Dickens described a visit to the American Midwest. While crossing the Mississippi River from Illinois to Missouri near St. Louis, he recorded, "passing, on the way, a spot called Bloody Island, the dueling ground of St. Louis, and so designated in honour [sic] of the last fatal combat fought there, which was with pistols, breast to breast." Both combatants, he continued, "fell dead upon the ground; and possibly some rational people may think….that they were no great loss to the community."[23] The duel to which Dickens referred occurred on August 27, 1831, and stands as the best example of how a person's perceived honor and masculinity could be connected to national events, and how those events sometimes had calamitous results on the local level.

Thomas Biddle (1790-1831) moved to St. Louis as a paymaster for the United States army in 1820, but he already had ties to the West. He served under Zebulon Pike in the War of 1812. His brother Nicholas, who was president of the Second Bank of the United States at the time of his brother's death, was hired by William Clark after the death of Meriwether Lewis to transform their journals of their western expedition into a book. He came from a prominent Philadelphia family; one aunt married James Wilkinson and another Rodolphe Tillier (see "George Champlain Sibley: Shady Dealings on the Missouri Frontier"). Biddle died in a duel on Bloody Island in 1831 at the hand of Spencer Pettis. (Photo: State Historical Society of Missouri Photo Collection)

On that August day, owing to the political turmoil eventually known to history as the "bank war," Major Thomas Biddle, brother of Second Bank of the United States President Nicolas Biddle, faced Congressman Spencer Pettis, a Jacksonian Democrat from St. Louis. Pettis had been elected to Congress two years earlier, and was running for reelection at the time of the confrontation. After Pettis scathingly criticized Nicolas Biddle and the Bank (which Jackson opposed, culminating in his famously vetoing the renewal of the bank's charter in 1832), a series of editorials by an anonymous author using the pseudonym "Missouri" appeared in the *St. Louis Beacon* angrily accusing the congressman of being "a dish of skimmed milk" and a "plate of dried herrings," concluding that Pettis was unfit to occupy his office.[24] Although such insults were certainly not uncommon in Antebellum politics (especially during an election year), they were enough to bruise the congressman's ego and he promptly responded to them in the paper under his true name.

Recalling this exchange more than forty years later, St. Louisan Edward Dobyns, a close associate of Pettis, recalled the congressman as "a refined gentleman, mild and affable, not given to bitterness or vindictiveness in his intercourse with gentlemen."[25] However, Pettis failed to live up to his friend's posthumous description. He was certainly *not* above publicly accusing Biddle of authoring the original defamatory editorials. Furthermore, wrote Pettis, hiding his true identity with the use of a pseudonym forced Pettis to question Biddle's manhood.[26]

This affront enraged Biddle. Barging into Pettis' hotel room where the congressman was laid up by an illness, Biddle physically beat Pettis with a cowhide whip. The attack caused such a commotion that Senator Benton, whose residence was directly opposite the hotel, rushed out to investigate. By then, Biddle had fled the scene and Pettis' pride seemed more hurt than his person.[27] Pettis threatened to seek retribution through the *Code Duello*, but Benton managed to calm his wrath. Interestingly, although he always regretted his own duel with Charles Lucas (in an argument that was more concerned with politics than for the life or peace of mind of his own friend), Benton suggested that the congressman's possible injury or death before the upcoming election would allow Biddle or one of his pro-bank partisans to steal the Congressional seat. For the present, then, Pettis should bring Biddle before a justice of the peace. Then, after the August election, Pettis could seek "such [a] course as [he] may deem proper to

The outcome of the duel between Spencer Pettis and Thomas Biddle in 1831 was almost certain, since the two men stood just five feet apart, as seen here with their seconds looking on. (Photo: State Historical Society of Missouri Photo Collection)

vindicate [his] honor as a gentleman."[28]

Despite the peculiarity of Benton's advice, it is nonetheless in accordance with a crucial clause in Wilson's *The Code of Honor,* which directed the actions of seconds. Rule Number 2, under the subheading "Second's Duty Before Challenge Sent," suggested that a person acting as a second in a duel was obligated to "use every effort to soothe and tranquilize your principal." Furthermore, the rule stipulated that it was the responsibility of the second to remain objective, and to "endeavor to persuade him [the principal] that there must have been some misunderstanding in the matter."[29] Because Benton's advice to Pettis so coincides with Wilson's guidelines, it is possible that Benton might have thought that he would be second in a duel to occur in the near future. Likewise, it may also be possible that Benton was familiar with Wilson's pamphlet—although there is no evidence that he owned a copy. Regardless of whether he read Wilson's pamphlet or not, it is clear that by advising Pettis not to immediately seek retribution from Biddle, Benton was

complying with a socially prescribed idea of how the close confidant of an injured party should act in such a situation.

Reluctantly, Pettis yielded to Benton's advice and had Biddle arrested on the very same day as the attack. Pettis' friend Dobyns was present at the hearing. When the case was brought before Judge Peter Ferguson on a peace warrant, Dobyns recalled, "Judge Ferguson very reasonably supposing in view of the outrage on Mr. Pettis that he might commit a breach of the peace by an attack on Major Biddle, very properly bound both parties to keep the peace."[30] Ferguson's injunction doubtlessly haunted Pettis. For the rest of the campaign, his constituents persistently reminded him of it whenever he attended a public event. Dobyns recalled of one such meeting, "here was an immense crowd from far and near in attendance to hear what a man might have to say who had been caned and had not asked for satisfaction."[31] Instead of the political issues, the injury to Pettis' honor became the story of the election.

This failure, in the eyes of the people, to properly defend his honor was not enough to cost Pettis his seat. In August, he won reelection. One biographer even suggests that sympathy for this dishonor done to him might have helped Pettis' cause.[32] Nonetheless, the long and arduous defense of his character during the campaign convinced Pettis that justice for Biddle's insults was still a necessity. Also, just as Benton's advice to postpone a duel coincided with a certain stipulation in Wilson's *Code of Honor,* so too Pettis' persistence in demanding satisfaction—even though delayed—also complied with the protocol on the proper course of action for an insulted party. In Wilson's pamphlet, the second step under the subheading "The Person Insulted, Before Challenge Sent," stipulated that if the insult came from a physical assault, regardless of whether a postponement was achieved by the second, the injured party was "bound still to have satisfaction, and must therefore make the demand."[33] After spending several days training with an expert duelist, Pettis authorized Captain Martin Thomas to present an official challenge to Biddle.

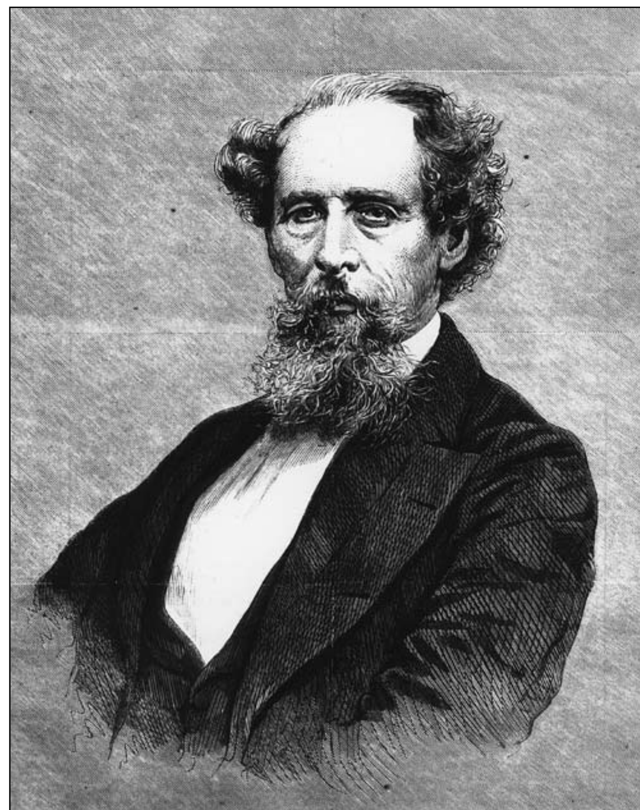
Being the challenged party, Biddle was given the option of choosing the method of the duel under the original *Code Duello*.[34] He chose pistols and set the date for August 27, but then surprised all persons involved by setting the distance at five feet. According to one of Biddle's biographers, the distance related to his nearsightedness.[35] With no objection from Pettis, on the afternoon of Friday, August 27, the two parties—consisting of Pettis and Biddle, their seconds, and two surgeons—rowed the short distance to Bloody Island. Given the publicity of this ongoing quarrel, it is no surprise that news of Pettis' challenge proliferated throughout St. Louis society. As the men rowed across the Mississippi, a large crowd of onlookers (Dobyns estimated over a thousand people) assembled along the Missouri shore to witness the culmination of nearly two months of political banter. Dobyns, ever the attentive witness, was among the crowd that day: "I saw the parties….pass over and heard very distinctly the report of the pistol; saw the friends running to the river for water—both were mortally wounded."[36]

The results of this duel were devastating. All the eyewitness accounts from that day testify that both men fell simultaneously. Pettis' ball lodged in Biddle's abdomen, while Biddle's passed through Pettis' side. The attending physicians declared the wounds to be mortal, and both men remained conscious just long enough to forgive one another. Most likely concerned with their posthumous reputations, even on the verge of death both men clearly saw it necessary to complete the steps of the *Code Duello* by declaring that satisfaction was achieved. After being carried back to the city, both lingered in agony. Pettis survived until the afternoon of August 28, Biddle a short time longer.[37]

By the mid-1830s and 1840s, political feuding made duels a common occurrence in St. Louis. However, the prominence of Biddle and Pettis in local society and the consequence of their altercation made this particular duel unique. According to Dickens and subsequent historians, it was this duel that ultimately earned Bloody Island its notorious nickname.[38]

Likewise, this engagement had a deep and long-lasting impact on the political and social culture of the city. With the violent deaths of these men, it is as if St. Louisans came to their senses and no longer saw the logic in defending one's honor and masculinity at the

By the time Charles Dickens (1812-1870) came to the United States in 1842, he was already a literary celebrity. In his *American Notes for General Circulation*, he commented on the island in St. Louis which the gentry called its "field of honor." (Photo: State Historical Society of Missouri Photo Collection)



muzzle of a gun. In the days following the deaths of these two prominent citizens, the populous turned out *en masse* for their respective funerals. Surprisingly, considering the politics involved in the culmination of the duel, the city newspapers reported that party loyalties were transcended, and men from all political backgrounds mourned their losses equally.[39]

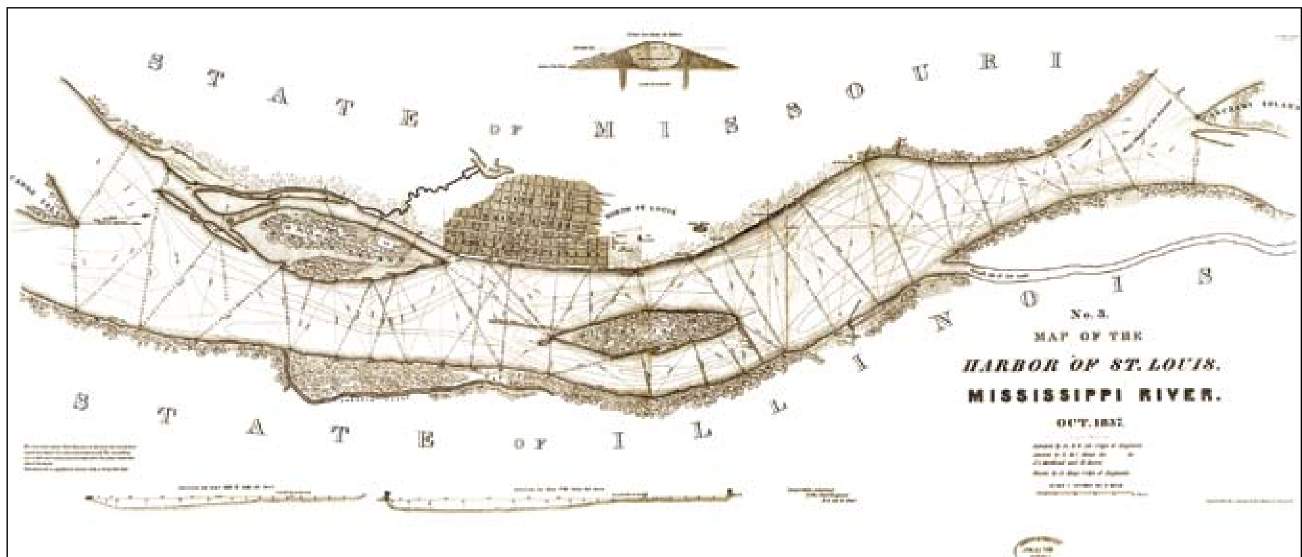
Duels continued to take place on Bloody Island for several years after the Biddle-Pettis affair. In 1842 Abraham Lincoln may have become the most famous person to step foot on the island's shore. After Lincoln wrote a scathing editorial in the Springfield newspapers against fellow Illinoisan James Shields, Shields challenged Lincoln and both parties made their way to the Missouri-Illinois border. Accounts of this confrontation are somewhat unclear as to where the duel actually took place, but most put the meeting somewhere south of Alton, Illinois. The popularity of Bloody Island and its proximity to Alton, makes it a viable candidate for the location. Either due to his unfamiliarity with the *Code Duello* or because he thought himself a bad shot with dueling pistols, Lincoln chose to fight with sabers. The duel was averted at the last minute, by most accounts, when Shields realized that the length of the saber, combined with the length of Lincoln's arm significantly hampered Shields' chances of leaving the field of honor unscathed. Immediately settling their affairs and declaring no further ill will toward each other, the Lincoln-Shields affair became, in the history of Bloody Island, the most famous duel that never was.[40]

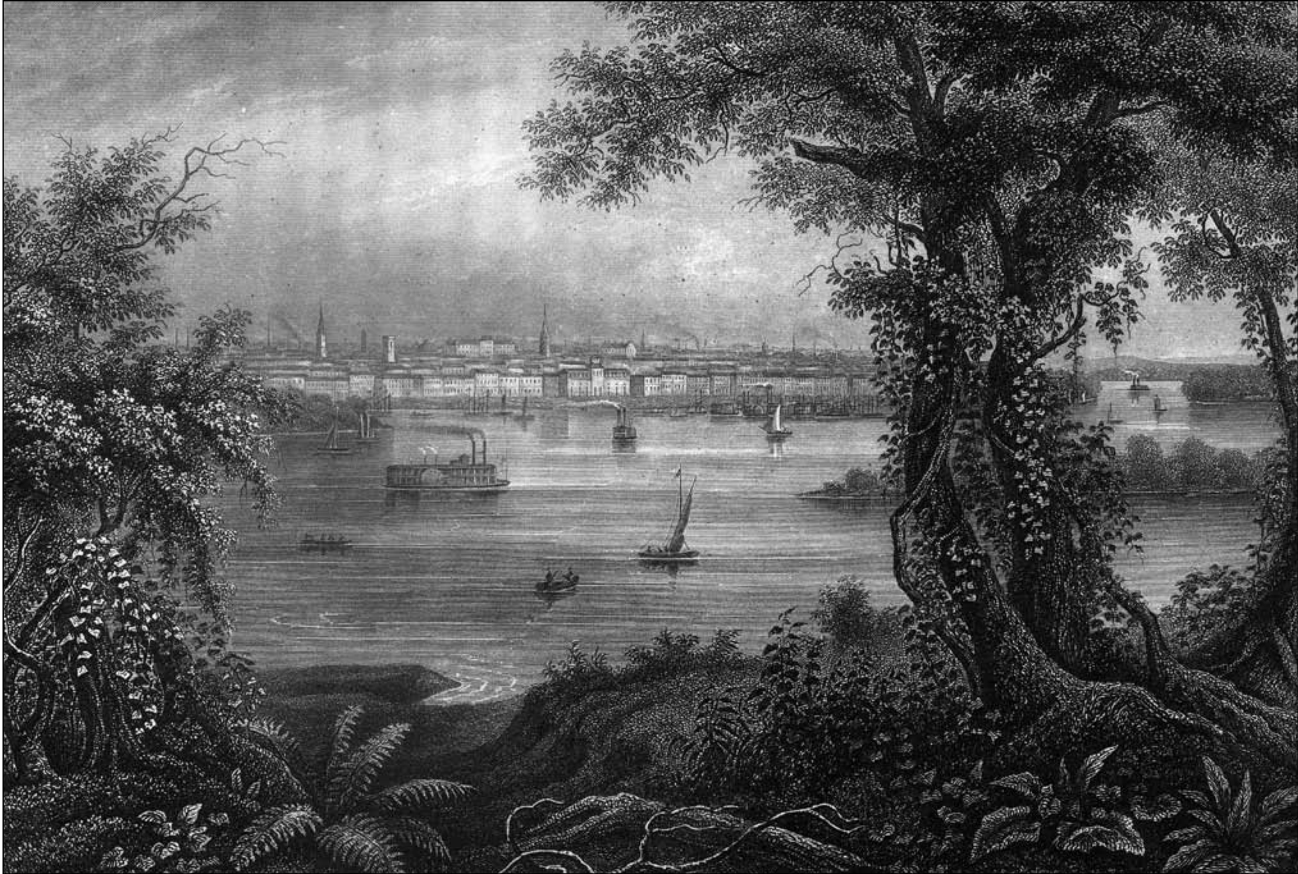
Although a few duels did occur after 1842, the Biddle-Pettis and Lincoln-Shields altercations marked the beginning of the end of the island's notorious history. Around the time of the earlier duel, a massive effort was undertaken involving a collaboration of municipal, state, and federal authorities to merge Bloody Island with the Illinois shore. Whereas the island had for many years been accepted as a natural part of the river facade, in the mid-1830s, it suddenly began to grow in size. As an increasing amount of sediment collected in the channel between the island and the river's western shore, a massive portion of the riverbed began to emerge when the water level was low, impeding the ability of riverboats to dock at the St. Louis wharf. Realizing that it lacked the necessary resources to confront this problem on its own, in January 1834 the Missouri legislature forwarded a memorial to Congress requesting federal aid to remove this growing threat to the city's economy. To further enhance the necessity of federal intervention, the memorial added—almost as an afterthought—the suggestion that the rising riverbed might also impede delivery of vital supplies at the docks of the federal arsenal just south of the St. Louis harbor.[41]

The federal government responded to this request by directing the Army Corps of Engineers to draw up a plan for improving river conditions at St. Louis. The solution, presented a few months later by Charles Gratiot, Chief Engineer of the Army Corps of Engineers, called for building a series of wing dams along various islands surrounding Bloody Island and reinforcing its western shore with "braces" to keep the current directed between the sand bar and the St. Louis wharf. Redirecting the current of the river toward the western shore, he hoped, would wash away the island and deepen the riverbed in front of the pier.[42]

In response to Gratiot's plan, Congress and the Army Corps of Engineers deployed Lieutenant Robert E. Lee

Since it first appeared in 1798 as a sandbar, what came to be called "Bloody Island" was becoming a hazard for the growing steamboat trade at the St. Louis levee. Currents in the river created (or removed) such sandbars, but it was the work of army engineer Robert E. Lee that removed the dueling site for good. Lee was sent to St. Louis as an officer in the Army Corps of Engineers in 1837 to design a system to keep the river's channel deep and hugging against the levee at St. Louis. In the process, Lee's design also ended duels by flooding the site of them. (Photo: State Historical Society of Missouri Photo Collection)





This idyllic view of St. Louis at mid-century belies the activities that took place near the foreground on the east side of the Mississippi River. (Photo: State Historical Society of Missouri Photo Collection)

(the future Confederate general) to oversee the project. Arriving in St. Louis in early 1838, Lee first undertook a new survey of the Mississippi from the confluence with the Missouri to south of St. Louis and proposed revisions to Gratiot's original plan. These revisions called for the fortification of the entire eastern channel of the Mississippi—from the Illinois shore to the northern tip of Bloody Island. Likewise, a wing dam would be constructed at the southern end of the island, extending into the channel parallel with the Missouri shore. Both structures, Lee explained, would be built from columns driven deep into the mud. A series of angled struts would connect and reinforce the main columns, and a planked wharf would then cap the structures. Finally, brush would be packed tightly between the columns, so as to collect sediments flowing south in the current and thus further reinforce the skeletal frames. This design, he hoped, would redirect the river current to the west—deepening the channel opposite the St. Louis wharf and causing the gap between the island and the Illinois shore to shallow.[43]

Although Lee devised a program with the assistance Henry Kayser (a German-born St. Louis cartographer and employee in the office of the U.S. Surveyor-General) to keep costs low by utilizing local supplies, labor, and transportation, the final plan cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, and took more than a decade to complete. Likewise, the project was constantly set back by bad weather, changes in municipal governments, and even an injunction from the court in Madison County, Illinois (which sought to capitalize from St. Louis' plight, and thereby attract river traffic to the Illinois side of the river). Nonetheless, by 1853, the project had achieved its desired goal. Within a few years of completing a final set of dikes and dams along the island's western front, the gap between the island and the Illinois shore shrank to a trickling brook. Additionally, the channel in front of St. Louis remained sufficiently deep, even when the water levels were low, to allow large steamboats access at all times of the year. By the mid-1850s, for all intents and purposes, Bloody Island ceased to exist.[44]

What remains of Bloody Island today? Not much. The small brook separating it from the Illinois shore continued to fill with sediment until the island eventually lost all semblance of its former identity. As a traveler reported to the *New York Times* in 1869, the former St. Louis dueling ground was now a mere shadow of its former self. After the ground was laid with railroad tracks, the new village of East St. Louis appeared along its banks.[45] Today the eastern stanchions of the Eads Bridge stand where once stood such influential citizens as Thomas Hart Benton

By the time St. Louis was a bustling commercial center seen in this c. 1851 view, dueling had fallen completely from favor—perhaps in part because the site for it had disappeared. (Photo: State Historical Society of Missouri Photo Collection)

and Abraham Lincoln. An observer perched on the grounds of the St. Louis Arch facing west would never know that directly across the river once stood an island that, while harmless upon first glance, provided the rich and influential an outlet for defending their honor and masculinity, becomong nationally renowned for the duels fought there.

NOTES

[1] 1853 Map of the City of St. Louis and Vicinity, Missouri State Archives, http://www.sos.mo.gov/archives/education/dueling/mapofstlouis1853.pdf.

[2] No. 3. Map of the Harbor of St. Louis, Mississippi River, Oct. 1837. Surveyed by Lt. R.E. Lee, Corps of Engineers, assisted by Lt. M.C. Meigs, J.S. Morehead, and H. Kayser. Drawn by Lt. Meigs, Corps of Engineers, Washington D. C.: Executive Department Publications, 1838.

[3] Missouri State Archives, "The Age of Political Duels," *Crack of the Pistol: Dueling in 19th Century Missouri*, http://www.sos.mo.gov/archives/education/dueling/political-duels.asp.

[4] Eric Horder, "The Duel and the English Law of Homocide," *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies,* 12 (1992): 419.

[5] In his history of dueling in Europe and America, Robert Baldick transcribed the entire text of the *Code Duello*. It can be found in Robert Baldick, *The Duel* (New York: The Hamlyn Publishing Group, 1970), 33-36.

[6] John Lyde Wilson, *The Code of Honor or Rules for the Government of Principals and Seconds in Duelling* (Charleston: James Phinney, 1858), 11-33.

[7] For a very good recounting of the Hamilton-Burr duel, see Thomas Fleming, *Duel: Alexander Hamilton, Aaron Burr, and the Future of America* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

[8] Ryan L. Dearinger, "Violence, Masculinity, Image, and Reality on the Antebellum Frontier," *Indiana Magazine of History,* 100 (March 2004): 29.

[9] Bertram Wyatt Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 353.

[10] *Ibid*., 356.

[11] Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1966), 54-57; Jon Meacham, *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House* (New York: Random House, 2008), 29-30, 38.
[12] Remini, *Andrew Jackson,* 57; Perry McCandless, "Thomas Hart Benton (1782-1858)" in *Dictionary of Missouri Biography,* Lawrence O. Christensen, William E. Foley, Gary R. Kremer, and Kenneth H. Winn, eds. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 59.
[13] Statement of Facts by Thomas Hart Benton and Edward Bates, Duel between Joshua Barton & Thomas Hemstead, August 11, 1816, Benton Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis [hereafter referred to as "Benton Papers"].
[14] *Ibid*.
[15] Isaac H. Sturgeon, *Notes on St. Louis Duels*, Isaac H. Sturgeon Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis; Bianca Adair, "Charles Lucas" in *Dictionary of Missouri Biography*, 505; Charles van Ravenswaay, "Bloody Island: Honor and Violence in Early Nineteenth-Century St. Louis," *Gateway Heritage* 10 (Spring 1990): 12.
[16] James Neal Primm, *Lion of the Valley: St. Louis, Missouri* (Boulder, Colorado: Pruett Publishing, 1981), 116-17.
[17] Charles Lucas to Thomas H. Benton, August 11, 1817, Benton Papers.
[18] Primm, *Lion of the Valley,* 117.
[19] Charles Lucas to Thomas Hart Benton, September 20, 1817, Benton Papers.
[20] Primm, *Lion of the Valley,* 117; Adair, "Charles Lucas," 505; McCandless, "Thomas Hart Benton," 59.
[21] Missouri State Archives, "1822 Anti-Dueling Statute," *Crack of the Pistol: Dueling in 19th Century Missouri*, http://www.sos.mo.gov/archives/education/dueling/1822Anit-DuelingStatute.pdf.
[22] Brown, *Southern Honor,* 356.
[23] Charles Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1842), 140.
[24] *Missouri Republican,* August 30, 1831; Dick Steward, "Thomas Biddle" in *Dictionary of Missouri Biography,* 66-67.
[25] Edward Dobyns to the Editor of the *Cincinnati Commercial*, February 16, 1877, Duels Collection, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.
[26] *Ibid*. Dobyns is likely quoting directly from the actual article. However, I was unable to procure a copy of this edition of the newspaper, along with the accompanying article. Still, secondary depictions of this duel (mainly retold in the biographies of Biddle and Pettis in the *Dictionary of Missouri Biography*) indicate the phrasing of these insults as genuine.
[27] Carl R. Baldwin, "The Battle of Bloody Island," *St. Louis Commerce,* March 1981, 36.
[28] Dobyns to the *Cincinnati Commercial*.
[29] Wilson, *Code of Honor,* 13-14.
[30] Dobyns to the *Cincinnati Commercial*.
[31] *Ibid*.
[32] Steward, "Thomas Biddle," 67; Steward, "Spencer Darwin Pettis," 612-13.
[33] Wilson, *Code of Honor,* 11.
[34] See articles XV and XVI of the *Code Duello*, as transcribed by Robert Baldick, *The Duel* (New York: The Hamlyn Publishing Group, 1970), 33-36.
[35] Steward, "Thomas Biddle," 67.
[36] Dobyns to the *Cincinnati Commercial*.
[37] *Missouri Republican,* August 30, 1831; *St. Louis Beacon,* August 30, 1831.
[38] Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation,* 140.
[39] *Ibid*.
[40] For a decent chronicle of the Lincoln-Shields affair see David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 90-9l; and Louis Vargo, "When Lincoln Lived by the Sword," *Civil War Times Illustrated* 40, 24-29.
[41] Congress, House Committee on Roads and Canals, *Harbor at St. Louis: To accompany bill, H.R. No. 451*, 23rd Cong., 1st Session, January 2, 1834 [hereafter referred to as "Missouri Memorial"], 21.
[42] Congress, House Committee on Roads and Canals, *Report of Charles Gratiot, Chief Engineer, Army Corps of Engineers attached to House Report No. 425,* 23rd Cong., 1st Sess., April 16, 1834,4-5.
[43] Congress, House Committee on Commerce, *Letter from the Secretary of War transmitting the information required by a resolution of the House of Representatives respecting the Harbor of St. Louis*, 25th Cong., 2nd Sess., April 4, 1838, 2 [hereafter referred to as "Letter from the Secretary of War"], 2-3,8.
[44] Robert E. Lee to Henry Kayser, February 1, 1838, Robert E. Lee Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis [hereafter referred to as "Lee Papers"]. In his March 9, 1838, letter to Kayser, Lee specifically directed him to secure a contract with the north St. Louis quarry if possible. Utilizing the south quarry, he feared, would increase the costs of transporting the stone to the island. Kayser, however, was unable to make a deal with the north quarry, so the stone used in the project came from the south. 1853 Map of the City of St. Louis and Vicinity, Missouri State Archives, http://www.sos.mo.gov/archives/education/dueling/mapofstlouis1853.pdf; William Favel, "Bloody Island," *The Encyclopedia of the History of Missouri: A Compendium of History and Biography for Ready Reference*, Howard L. Conard, ed., vol. 1 (St. Louis: The Southern History Company, 1901), 303.
[45] *New York Times,* August 20, 1869.