

THE DUELS AT SILVER CREEK

The piercing crack of gun shots rang out through the trees. Two men facing each other at 50 paces dropped smoking pistols to their sides, as the other actors in the weird scene rushed forward to see if either man was wounded. The year was 1809 . . . the place, the Indiana shore of the Ohio River where two of the most prominent Kentuckians of the day, Humphrey Marshall and Henry Clay, were settling their differences in a duel at Silver Creek.

When Humphrey Marshall called Henry Clay a liar on the floor of the Kentucky House of Representatives on January 4, 1809, Clay had, in the custom of the times, only one recourse to vindicate his honor. That very night Clay sent to Marshall a challenge to meet him in a duel. The challenge was promptly accepted and all Kentucky waited breathlessly for the outcome.

Clay, later to be ranked among the most famous of American politicians and statesmen, was in 1809 already well known in Kentucky. His opponent, Humphrey Marshall, was then even better known in the Bluegrass State. A first cousin of John Marshall, famed chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, Humphrey Marshall had served in the U.S. Senate and was probably the outstanding member of the Federalist Party in Kentucky. Clay was a follower of Thomas Jefferson and a political opponent of the Federalists.

Ironically, the duel between Clay and Marshall was the culmination of a train of events set in motion by the actions of Aaron Burr, then in disgrace in the Eastern states after he had fatally wounded Alexander Hamilton in the most famous duel in American history.

Burr was called before a Federal grand jury in Lexington late in 1806 after the district attorney there became suspicious of his activities. Burr secured the services of the rising young Henry Clay as his defense attorney. The district attorney was a brother-in-law of Humphrey Marshall, and Marshall, throughout the investigation, took an unofficial role as adviser to the prosecution, and attacked Clay in the columns of a Lexington newspaper. When the grand jury failed to return an indictment against Burr, Marshall took the result as a personal defeat, and became a bitter enemy of Clay. This enmity, coupled with political differences, came to a climax two years later on the floor of the Kentucky House of Representatives and the challenge to a duel resulted.

So, it was that early on the morning of January 19, 1809, the sound of dipping oars marked the approach of two small boats to the Indiana shore just below the point at which Silver Creek empties into the Ohio River . . . a point known at that time as "Shirt Tail Bend."

In the first round of shots, Clay's fire grazed Marshall's side, causing a slight flesh wound. In the second round both men missed, and in the third round, Clay was wounded in the thigh. Though Clay wanted to continue the duel, his aides decided he was bleeding too badly and so the duel ended. Clay in later years became one of the most famous statesmen Kentucky has ever produced and Marshall was later to write the first definitive history of Kentucky.

Though the Clay-Marshall duel brought together the two most famous antagonists to level pistols at each other on the banks of Silver Creek, it was not the only duel fought there. There were three others and all the participants were residents of Lexington, Kentucky.

The first was on December 20, 1805, when Major Thomas Bodley met another Marshall on the field of honor – Dr. Louis Marshall, a brother of chief

justice John Marshall, and later to become president of Washington and Lee University. So far as is known, neither man was injured.

Then in December, 1812, Captain Nathaniel Hart, a brother-in-law of Henry Clay, traded shots with Samuel E. Watson. Again, neither man was injured.

The last duel on Silver Creek occurred on May 15, 1841, between Cassius M. Clay, fiery Kentucky abolitionist, and Robert Wickliffe, Jr. Cassius Clay's outspoken opposition to slavery in the South incurred the wrath of the wealthy plantation owners of the Bluegrass, and precipitated the duel with Wickliffe. Two rounds were fired, but neither man was injured.

Today the water flows placidly past the spot where once angry men met to risk their lives in defense of personal honor. The world that demanded such violent action is gone, and even "Shirt Tail Bend" has vanished . . . victim of the shifting channels of Silver Creek.

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