

Violence, Masculinity, Image, and Reality on the Antebellum Frontier

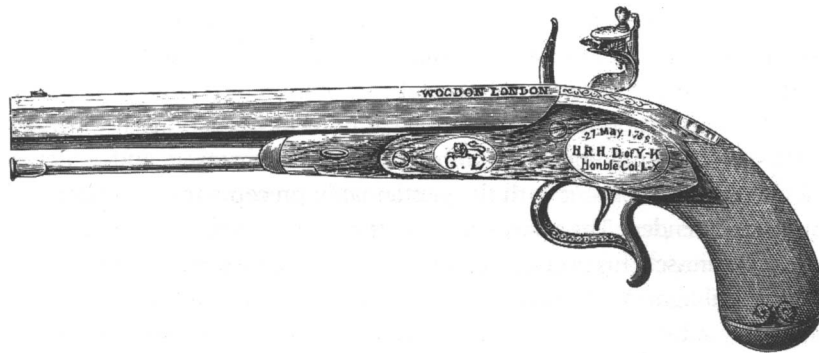
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It is a permanent and universal interest of mankind that men should not kill each other; but the particular and momentary interest of a nation or class may in certain cases make homicide excusable or even honorable. Honor is nothing but this particular rule, based on a particular state of society, by means of which a people distributes praise or blame.

—ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE

Tocqueville, perhaps the most prophetic and certainly the most cited nineteenth-century foreign observer of American life, had more to say about the image, reality, and significance of violence than scholars have recognized. Like many of his contemporaries who observed Jacksonian America, he was puzzled by the ambiguous relationship between honor, violence, and social class, particularly as it played out in the ritual of the duel. The refusal of a challenge to duel, Tocqueville noted, was the only act he knew to be considered both honorable and dishonorable. Viewing

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This dueling pistol is typical of those that were used on the antebellum frontier. They were not very accurate beyond short range and often missed their intended target.

Reproduced from Ben C. Truman, *Duelling in America*,
ed. Steven Randolph Wood (1884; San Diego, Calif., 1992).

the custom as aristocratic and driven by insecurity and greed, he was, “astonish[ed] to find that when honor is at the zenith of its power its rules are at their strangest; apparently the further they get from common sense, the better they are obeyed.” Tocqueville saw little room for rules of honor in a democratic and expanding nation. Lacking both “deep roots and strong influence,” he wrote, these rules were “like a religion whose temples are allowed to remain but in which no one longer believes.”¹

As a peculiar and exclusive, yet infrequent, form of violence, the duel tells us much about *who* could fight, *how* they could fight, and the consequences involved. Honor, autonomy, chivalry, and revenge—these and other factors have long received the attention of scholars who, following Tocqueville, have investigated the social, political, and psychological aspects of the American version of the *code duello*. Far less noted has been the degree to which this form of violence helped elites distinguish their standing and image from that of the “rough-and-tumble” lower classes of the backcountry, thus setting the parameters for democratic opportunity. Few scholars have critiqued the efforts of elites to legitimize the duel—including the unwritten rules governing weapons and tactics, gentlemanly conduct, and even style of dress

¹Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, J.P. Thayer and Max Lerner, eds. (2 vols., New York, 1966), II, 581, 592–602. See volume II, chapter 18, for Tocqueville’s views on honor in the United States and other democratic societies.

and language—as being completely at odds with the Jacksonian ethic of spontaneous and uninhibited freedom from prescribed social, legal, and political barriers. Moreover, the discrepancy between the image these men wished to secure and the reality of their actions has been virtually ignored. The frontier “affair of honor” was often conducted, portrayed, and construed in a manner inconsistent with the gentlemanly precepts that its champions staunchly defended. This essay examines the identity of the frontier duelist as defined by himself, his peers, perceptive travelers, newspaper editors, religious and political figures, and fiction writers. Focused on the midwestern frontier, its primary subjects are elites, aspiring elites, and their ostensible inferiors.

The frontier region under analysis here includes southern and central Indiana, Ohio, and Illinois, as well as upland Kentucky. Heavy migration to these areas began after the Revolution and was dominated by upland southerners primarily from Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia. Cultural geographers and historians recognize the Indiana, Illinois, and Ohio frontiers as southern cultural regions, extensions of the upland South distinguished by their crops and livestock, housing types, food, religion, and dialect. Some historians have demonstrated the extent to which subsistence-farming regions were loyal to the tenets of Jacksonian democracy, while others have emphasized the influence of the “civilized” Northeast and the “violent” trans-Mississippi West in the context of national expansion. Each of these concentrations tends to overshadow the unique cultural customs of this middle frontier region. The impact of a “Yankee diaspora” through New York and the Western Reserve into the upper Midwest, for example, has led some historians to argue that a select northern middle class, through its control of publishing, politics, the pulpit, free-labor ideology, and bourgeois middle-class values, culturally dominated the region in the antebellum era. As a result, Yankee notions of manhood, honor, and gentility have obfuscated the breadth of the influences that went into cultural and social formation on the frontier. As late as 1850, Yankee-born settlers from New England and the Middle Atlantic states constituted only 8.8 percent of the total population in Indiana, 17.4 percent in Illinois, and 18.9 percent in Ohio. Generalizations about “Yankees,” “yeomen,” or “southern cavaliers,” and recycled images of western violence and lawlessness, distract from, rather than shed light on, the cultural and institutional trends that took shape in the antebellum Midwest. They emphasize exceptions, not the rule.²

²For masculinity and political culture, see Nicole Etcheson, “Manliness and the Political Culture of the Old Northwest,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, XV (Fall 1995), 59–77; Etcheson, *The Emerging*

Frontier settlers, whether they were subsistence farmers, squatters, or wage laborers, shared an antipathy towards both the southern planter class and “penny-pinching” Yankees. This was particularly the case if the planter’s or Yankee’s wealth was inherited rather than earned. Superior status did not automatically transfer from the regions of provenance, but had to be earned all over again on the frontier. The position of frontier elites was thus far less secure in a region that was experiencing significant political, economic, and demographic change; the result was tremendous social ambiguity and insecurity. Nevertheless, some folks rose to a higher station. Those who did were likely to be legal, political, or medical professionals, or aspiring elites, including younger, up-and-coming statesmen, professionals, and farmers. The last group often won the support of a rural public hostile to excesses in wealth and political power and devoted to a vigorous, self-governing brand of republicanism. Higher status was acceptable on the frontier, as long as it was earned fairly. The parameters of fair play were negotiated via competing notions of masculinity and honor. Sometimes, but not as often as has been argued, violence was involved.

This essay also addresses the paradoxical typology of lethal violence common to the antebellum frontier, in the process challenging conventional ideas about the extent to which gentlemen duelists were able to convince the public of their time as well as posterity that dueling was not only widely practiced and accepted, but was also more manly and honorable than the disorderly “roughhousing” engaged in by the lower sort. Portraying dueling as an exceptional, ritualistic, symbolic, neurotic, and ineffective practice embraced by a marginal segment of frontier society, this study compares the notorious custom to “common” violence that was, arguably, more effective, more consistent with democratic principles, and equally governed by civic parameters and conventional rules. In offering a new lens through which to view the relationship between violence, class, honor, and masculinity in a region emblematic of the democratic experiment in westward expansion,

Midwest: *Upland Southerners and the Political Culture of the Old Northwest, 1787–1861* (Bloomington, Ind., 1996); and Joanne Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven, Conn., 2001). For migration, cultural formation, and regional identity, see Andrew R.L. Cayton, *Frontier Indiana* (Bloomington, Ind., 1996); James E. Davis, *Frontier Illinois* (Bloomington, Ind., 1998); R. Douglas Hurt, *The Ohio Frontier: Crucible of the Old Northwest, 1720–1830* (Bloomington, Ind., 1996); and J. Mills Thornton, “The Ethic of Subsistence and the Origins of Southern Secession,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, XLVIII (Summer 1989), 67–85. For Northern influences on masculinity, see E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York, 1993); and Mark C. Carnes and Clyde Griffen, eds., *Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian America* (Chicago, 1990).

this essay considers the personal and regional realities that have been eschewed or overlooked in favor of a violent, oversimplified, and romanticized frontier image. Masculinity and honor, ideas imposed upon an expanding and diversifying society, were severely threatened in their frontier setting.³

To southern gentlemen—often statesmen, slaveholders, lawyers, or professionals—dueling demonstrated uncompromising courage, stability, chivalry, calmness under stress, and class superiority. None of this was lost on frontier elites. Southern elites transplanted to Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, or Kentucky, had trouble adhering to the image of both southern cavalier and western hero in a region where violence was *not* a precondition for success and survival. The midwestern gentleman's demeanor was often characterized more by anxiety than by reserve and stoicism. "I fear I shall have to kill him before he will be at rest," Jonathan Jennings told his brother-in-law prior to openly challenging Henry Hurst, a court clerk, to a duel on the grounds that the latter was jealous of Jennings's position in the territorial government's land office. Hurst refused the challenge from Jennings, who later became Indiana's first governor.⁴ Kentucky's beloved Henry Clay journeyed to Floyd County, Indiana, for an 1809 "interview" with Humphrey Marshall, a fellow member of the Kentucky legislature, to settle with pistol and ball what they had instigated with oratory in the statehouse. Nerves and pistol malfunctions left both gentlemen standing after firing two rounds, and the third witnessed

³Numerous scholars have studied the origins and consequences of frontier violence in all of its forms, and yet those who have studied dueling have focused primarily on the South and Southwest, where it had a greater tradition, following, and frequency. Clayton Cramer's study of early concealed weapon laws touches on the duel in Indiana and Kentucky; Dick Steward devotes a book-length study to dueling in Missouri; and Bertram Wyatt-Brown's latest book covers a few violent escapades that made their way into Kentucky. Clayton E. Cramer, *Concealed Weapon Laws of the Early Republic: Dueling, Southern Violence, and Moral Reform* (Westport, Conn., 1999), particularly chapters 3, 4, and 6; Dick Steward, *Duels and the Roots of Violence in Missouri* (Columbia, Mo., 2000); Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *The Shaping of Southern Culture: Honor, Grace, and War, 1760s–1880s* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2001), 57–79. Other analytical studies include Dickson Bruce, *Violence and Culture in the Antebellum South* (Austin, Tex., 1979); Jack Kenny Williams, *Dueling in the Old South: Vignettes of Social History* (College Station, Tex., 1980); Kenneth S. Greenberg, "The Nose, the Lie, and the Duel in the Antebellum South," *American Historical Review*, XVC (Winter 1990), 57–74. More traditional studies include Don C. Seitz, *Famous American Duels* (New York, 1929); William Oliver Stevens, *Pistols at Ten Paces* (Boston, 1940); J. Winston Coleman, Jr., "The Code Duello in Ante-Bellum Kentucky" *Filson Club Historical Quarterly*, XXX (1956), 125–40.

⁴Dorothy Riker, comp., *Unedited Letters of Jonathan Jennings* (Indianapolis, 1932). For an excellent description of Jennings, his career, governmental philosophy, and a history of early Indiana politics, see Cayton, *Frontier Indiana*, chapter 9.

another misfire by Clay, whose minor thigh wound prompted his party to terminate the meeting. Clay's next duel was highlighted by an unwilling participant (John Randolph of Virginia), another faulty pistol, consistently poor marksmanship, a torn coat, and a handshake. "I do not fire at you, Mr. Clay!" shouted Randolph as he fired his third shot into the air. The gentlemen met and embraced halfway, as Randolph joked that his opponent owed him a new coat, and Clay answered, "I am glad the debt is no greater."⁵

Territorial politics on the old frontier were highly personal. Yet on the basis of merely anecdotal evidence it has been argued that because dueling was inevitable, laws against the practice were quickly adopted. Although the Indiana territorial legislature established fines of up to 250 dollars as well as jail sentences of up to twelve months for challenging someone to a duel, these measures do not necessarily indicate a great propensity towards dueling on the part of the territory's earliest settlers.⁶ This argument fails to consider the demeanor and concerns of the region's migrants, as well as the territory's interest in attracting newcomers. As emigrants from the largest donor state to Indiana, Illinois, and Ohio, the backwoodsmen, squatters, "mechanicks," and farming families of Kentucky contributed significantly to the southern character of this region. Nevertheless, the culture they created was characterized more by cooperation than conflict. During his visit to the frontier in the mid-1830s, Sir Charles Augustus Murray described "the Ohians

⁵Coleman, "The Code Duello in Ante-Bellum Kentucky," 129–30. The original correspondence of the Clay-Randolph duel is included in Seitz, *Famous American Duels*, 227–50.

⁶In *Concealed Weapon Laws of the Early Republic*, Cramer furthers the argument that such laws were not designed as a solution to violence in general; they were, rather, designed to curtail a certain kind of violence that was, in turn, "a side effect of a well-intentioned effort at reforming American society." Attempting to uncover state motivation for adopting weapon laws, Cramer argues that reformers tried to use laws to improve the morals of the masses but were unsuccessful. Because the various legal consequences that states adopted to combat dueling were contrary to popular culture, murder and manslaughter replaced the code as the method for resolving insults (pp. 7, 139–41). Although provocative, this is an ahistorical argument. Cramer fails to recognize that with the duel, he is dealing with an infrequent, exclusive event. Murder, manslaughter, and even rioting, were much closer to the norm. Various scholars have maintained (often with insufficient evidence, but at times more convincingly) that violence was the defining element of frontier life, and decades of movies, television, and pulp fiction have reinforced such assertions. Nonetheless, some have sought a more realistic approach, and have taken into account many factors to contest the thesis that Richard Slotkin has termed "regeneration through violence." Violent generalizations still characterize much of the trans-Mississippi frontiers, but as for regions east of the Mississippi (the focus of this study), to quote James E. Davis, "mounting evidence points to frontier tranquility." Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Middletown, Conn., 1973); Davis, *Frontier Illinois*, 304.

[sic]" as a "quiet, industrious, peaceable people, carrying the 'republicanism of democracy' to its highest pitch." These settlers, being "too far removed from the scene of action and not sufficiently congregated in manufacturing or commercial masses to give to their personal feelings the bitterness and personality so prevalent in the East," were more typical of the trans-Appalachian frontier than were the hot-tempered duelists of lore.⁷

Violence, particularly when it resulted in death, was an infrequent occurrence on the midwestern frontier. In his first volume of the *Western Monthly Review* published in 1828 in Cincinnati, editor Timothy Flint included an essay on "The National Character of the Western People," in which he noted that in the Ohio country "the annual number of deaths from violence . . . has been less, in proportion to its population, than any other state in the Union." Novelist James Fenimore Cooper, visiting the same region, observed that duels there were "less frequent than in any other civilized country."⁸ And yet Cooper may have introduced his own frontier archetype, the expert marksman and hunter Leatherstocking, a bit early for the Ohio Valley. By at least one measure, firearms themselves were not a matter of great public attention; a study of two Cincinnati magazines from the 1830s recently led a scholar to conclude that education, not hunting, received the most editorial space. Of the 356 articles published in the first three years of the *Western Monthly Magazine*, only one was on hunting and a second dealt with a shooting match. *Western Miscellany*, in its first year, devoted only two of more than 300 articles to hunting. The former magazine, claiming that "we aspire to be useful," contained no mention of dueling pistols, military weapons, or gaming strategies, while the latter maintained that respect for the law and avoidance of violence was far more characteristic of the West than the East. Frontier travelers expecting to witness the seduction and vengeance of the wilderness that were popular themes in both country folklore and western fiction were in for a surprise, as Flint suggested:

⁷"Mechanicks" referred to all those skilled in trades of the time, such as blacksmiths, builders, and millers. Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *The Trans-Appalachian Frontier: People, Societies, and Institutions, 1775-1850* (New York, 1978), 159; Charles Augustus Murray, *Travels in North America* (2 vols., London, 1839), II, 210-11.

⁸Timothy Flint, "The National Character of the Western People," *Western Monthly Review*, I (May 1827-April 1828), 336; James Fenimore Cooper, *Notions of the Americans, Picked up by a Traveling Bachelor* (1828; 2 vols., New York, 1963), II, 297.

If the inference were drawn, that the [western] people are generally quarrelsome and murderous in their dispositions, no conclusion would be wider from the fact. A stranger going into the regions with proper introduction, is astonished, and most agreeably disappointed, to find the general aspect of society so pleasant, and the people so amiable and respectable.⁹

And yet, contrary to Flint's observation, the Ohio River Valley was not free of violence, although such altercations as occurred were rarely lethal and typically exaggerated, just as the duel was. Canal construction laborers ("navvies") worked long hours for meager pay in terrible conditions, and were exposed to such diseases as malaria, cholera, and tuberculosis. Alienated economically from the skilled labor market, they were seen as offering mere "animal power" to prepare the ground for industrial production. Marginalized socially from mainstream society, their drinking, cursing, gambling, and brawling was viewed by their peers as anything but constructive. Violent clashes between canallers and local residents were not uncommon; nor was the sort of roughhousing typical of the canal worker's culture. Such behavior nevertheless does not entirely warrant British traveler James Silk Buckingham's judgment that canal workers were "not merely poor, but . . . drunken, dirty, indolent, and riotous, so as to be the objects of dislike and fear to all in whose neighborhood they congregate in large numbers." Canallers found in sporadic violence what historian Peter Way has called a "rough camaraderie" central to the culture of "maleness" that served as a reaction to their social exclusion. Was elite violence (as infrequent as it was) and behavior the only kind that could be "honorable"? By whose definition do we limit the quality and accessibility of "maleness"? Such questions are particularly relevant in areas and occupations where violence is thought to be widespread.¹⁰

⁹Cooper introduced Natty Bumppo, or Leatherstocking, in his first backwoods novel, *The Pioneers; or, The Sources of the Susquehanna*, which sold 3,500 copies on the morning of its publication in 1823. Michael A. Bellesiles, "The Origins of Gun Culture in the United States, 1760–1865," *Journal of American History*, LXXXIII (Summer 1996), 425–55, esp. 440; Flint, "National Character," 336.

¹⁰See James Silk Buckingham, *The Eastern and Western States of America* (3 vols., London, 1842), III, 223–24; Peter Way, "Evil Humors and Ardent Spirits: The Rough Culture of Canal Construction Laborers," *Journal of American History*, LXXIX (Winter 1993), 1397–1428.

Scholars looking at another frontier occupational group—flatboatmen—have found that 95 percent of the boats arriving in New Orleans during the antebellum period listed Indiana, Illinois, or Ohio as their point of origin. Real life for western rivermen was far removed from the exaggerated tales of Davy Crockett, Mike Fink, and other adventurous, hard-drinking, violent frontier heroes (affectionately remembered as the “Alligator Horses” in frontier novels and legends). By the 1820s, flatboatmen were responsible, educated, and religious, and perceived themselves as family men who had given up their bad habits. They were “Jacksonian Men,” not by virtue of their reckless disposition or their freedom from restraint, but due instead to their admission (or entrance) as “common men” into the budding capitalist economy. Nonetheless, as Michael Allen argues, the myth of the Alligator Horse came to provide Jacksonian America with an alter ego, a “darker side with which law-abiding citizens could secretly identify even while following the norms of civilized society.” In reality, the Ohio River Valley was a safe and hospitable place for dockers, railroaders, canallers, and flatboatmen, as well as for gentleman politicians, lawyers and doctors. It was similar to the farming frontiers of Illinois and Indiana, and typical generally of the working-class culture of the trans-Appalachian West.¹¹

Illinois may have been more susceptible to violence than its neighbors, due to its unusual mixture of French, French-Indian, Indian, German, English, southern, Yankee, black, and mulatto inhabitants, each representing different backgrounds, religions, occupations, and ideas about justice. Nevertheless, Illinoisans, whether quieting political disputes, abolishing debtor imprisonment, forming settlers’ associations as a defense against large-scale land speculators, or eliminating de facto slavery in state supreme court decisions, adhered to a robust republicanism in which consensus usually precluded bloodshed. An 1810 territorial statute that mandated the death penalty for anyone found guilty of killing his opponent in a duel was either effective or unnecessary, for a state law of its kind was never adopted, and yet only one duel was ever fought on Illinois soil, in which the murder of

¹¹See Michael Allen, “The Riverman as Jacksonian Man,” *Western Historical Quarterly*, XXI (Fall 1990), 305–20; Allen, *Western Riverman, 1763–1861: Ohio and Mississippi Boatmen and the Myth of the Alligator Horse* (Baton Rouge, La., 1990); Peter Way, “Evil Humors and Ardent Spirits,” 1418–28; Steven J. Ross, *Workers on the Edge: Work, Leisure, and Politics in Industrializing Cincinnati, 1788–1890* (New York, 1985); and Timothy R. Mahoney, *River Towns in the Great West: The Structure of Provincial Urbanization in the American Midwest, 1820–1870* (New York, 1990).

Alonzo Stuart justified the hanging of William Bennett in 1819. A second duel, in 1842, was averted by the humor and ingenuity of Abraham Lincoln after accepting the challenge of Illinois state official James Shields. The origins, consequences, and ultimate meaning of both of these incidents have since been distorted in a manner consistent with the assumptions of a violent frontier where brave men used the duel to achieve positions of power, and where elite violence exemplified a social hierarchy whose members sought to civilize a rugged and socially immature society. Comparing the surviving accounts of these incidents to the scholarly work thereafter reveals the numerous difficulties that accompany blanket statements and rash generalizations of frontier violence, the images of its participants, and their relationships to alleged inferiors.¹²

The facts of the one duel that was actually consummated in Illinois bear out the need for caution. Details of this 1819 encounter further deflate the notion that violence was frequent, that its proponents were experienced, and that its motives and results were the stuff of honorable gentlemen. In 1821 Gershom Flagg, the self-educated postmaster of Edwardsville, Illinois, wrote a letter to his mother in which he described the town and surrounding countryside as peaceful, with "very few deaths." He mentioned a few petty crimes, robberies, and the public whipping of a man who had attempted to "injure a Ladys [sic] character," the woman being awarded "3000 dollars damages" by a jury of her peers. He also referred to the hanging of a man for murder. The man was William Bennett.¹³

In February 1819, Bennett's horse had broken into a cornfield owned by Alonzo Stuart, a prominent young lawyer, prompting the latter to criticize Bennett's "poor fences" and his horse's lack of "savior faire [sic]." When two of Bennett's friends, Jacob Short and Nat Fike, learned of this they

¹²Davis, *Frontier Illinois*, 164, 212–13, 286–319; Carl J. Ekberg, "Agriculture, *Mentalité*, and Violence on the Illinois Frontier," *Illinois Historical Journal*, LXXXVIII (Spring 1995), 101–16. The territorial statute is listed in Francis S. Philbrick, ed., *The Laws of Illinois Territory, 1809–1818* (Collections of the Illinois State Historical Library, Vol. XXV; Springfield, 1950), 36. The Stuart-Bennett (misspelled "Stewart") duel is mentioned in Cramer, *Concealed Weapon Laws*, 83–84; and in Ben C. Truman, *The Field of Honor, Being a Complete and Comprehensive History of Duelling in All Countries* (New York, 1884), 78. The Lincoln-Shields challenge is mentioned in Steward, *Duels and the Roots of Violence*, 126–27; and Truman, *Field of Honor*, 567.

¹³For two able accounts of the Stuart-Bennett duel, see Steward, *Duels and the Roots of Violence*, 39–40; and Newton Bateman and Paul Selby, eds., *Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois* (2 vols., Chicago, 1907), I, 138–39. Barbara Lawrence and Nedra Branz, eds., *The Flagg Correspondence: Selected Letters, 1816–1854* (Carbondale, Ill., 1986), 30–31.

persuaded him to challenge Stuart, whose high social status presented a chance for all three men to climb a rung on the social ladder.¹⁴ Stuart was completely averse to the practice of dueling, and therefore was disinclined to accept the challenge; considering that Bennett's reputation as a ruffian disqualified him as a gentleman, to have fought with him would itself have been a violation of the code of honor. Nonetheless, Stuart, with no intention of firing at Bennett, consented after Short and Fike promised to load both rifles with powder but not bullets.

Thomas Ford noted in his *History of Illinois* (1854) that Stuart's death resulted from a sham duel that was arranged solely to ridicule Bennett. An Indiana newspaper reported the incident on March 26, 1819:

A man of the name of Stuard lost his life last week at Belleville [Illinois], in what was intended to be a sham duel . . . The man who was to be *scared*, happened some how or other to get a bullet mixed with his powder, and Stuard who was to act the part of the *scaror* [*sic*] was killed on the ground. The weapons were rifles, and some fifty or sixty of the villagers went out to see the sport.¹⁵

Benjamin Truman, whose history of dueling in America, published in 1884, was one of the earliest treatments of the subject, noted that it was the "boast of Illinois that but one duel has ever been fought upon her soil." Since then, scholars have used Bennett's subsequent execution to suggest that dueling had become unacceptable to the people of Illinois, and that the hanging had a symbolic quality which, in turn, thwarted the sort of insults and

¹⁴Each dueling party included at least one second, who, in consulting with the duelist, was responsible for communicating the encounter (often in local newspapers, always by word of mouth), arranging the specifics (time, place, distance, weapons, tactics), maintaining fairness and order during the affair, and ensuring that the challenger's "satisfaction" was met. The parties normally agreed upon a doctor (typically a surgeon) to attend the encounter and give needed medical attention. Surgeons judged the severity of the wounds and determined whether or not a participant could continue.

¹⁵Thomas Ford, *History of Illinois from Its Commencement as a State in 1818 to 1847* (Chicago, 1854), 40 (emphasis in the original); Brookville *Enquirer & Indiana Telegraph*, March 26, 1819. Clayton Cramer, one of the few scholars who has studied the duel in its frontier setting, referred to the Stuart-Bennett encounter, but failed to link the duel to the Brookville newspaper article, instead citing it as a wholly separate encounter, perhaps because the writer had misspelled Stuart's last name.

impulses that led men to the “field of honor.”¹⁶ Whether or not this is true, it overlooks the fact that the Stuart-Bennett duel was not only the last duel in Illinois history but the *first*; that before and after this incident, violence of the sort was nonexistent.

In what almost became the second duel in Illinois’s history, when Abraham Lincoln as a young Illinois legislator accepted an 1842 challenge from state official James Shields he wryly remarked on the convenient proximity of the chosen field of honor—a sandbar on the Mississippi—to the state penitentiary. The background to the Lincoln-Shields encounter deserves close analysis for what it reveals about the inherent contradictions in the norms of masculine and gentlemanly behavior in the emerging Midwest. In February 1842 the State Bank of Illinois, which Lincoln staunchly defended in legislative debates, was forced to close, its notes having become valueless. Shields, a Democrat acting in his capacity as state auditor, ordered that the notes not be accepted in payment of taxes. The Whigs’ response was immediate and ruthless. They attacked the Democratic administration through Shields, who, next to Stephen A. Douglas, was the party’s leading young representative. Lincoln was the ringleader of this derisive cabal. Writing under the alias of “Aunt Rebecca,” an unpolished but clever countrywoman who had “authored” previous letters to the editor of the *Sangamo Journal* from “Lost Township,” he blamed the financial crisis on the Democrats, insisting that Shields’s announcement was “a lie, and not a well told one at that. It grins out like a copper dollar. Shields is a fool as well as a liar. With him truth is out of the question.” Lincoln next encouraged two friends, Mary Todd (whom he had been courting) and Julia Jayne, to contribute criticism ridiculing Shields’s self-promoted image as irresistible to women. Lincoln biographer David Herbert Donald affirms that Lincoln and his associates were “playing a dangerous game” with the “Lost Township” letters.¹⁷ Shields, who became a state supreme court judge, a commissioner of the U.S. Land Office, a decorated general in the Mexican War, and the only senator to represent three different states (Illinois, Minnesota, and Missouri), enjoyed a distinguished public reputation despite rumors that he was hot-tempered, humorless, and a womanizer.

¹⁶Truman, *Field of Honor*, 78; Cramer, *Concealed Weapon Laws*, 82–83, has argued such.

¹⁷David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York, 1996), 88–93. Donald provides a wonderful account of this political and personal dilemma, revealing how the troubled young Whig lawyer violated his own principles by engaging in slanderous newspaper propaganda (via his close relationship with the editor of the *Sangamo Journal*), and drawing Mary Todd and Julia Jayne into the fiasco.

Lincoln's engagement in the politics of character assassination led to an embarrassing compromise of his personal and civic principles. His behavior emphasizes the anxiety and insecurity of frontier political culture. When Lincoln assumed full public responsibility for all of the "Lost Township" letters, Shields responded in the *Sangamo Journal*, demanding "a full, positive, and absolute retraction of all offensive allusions used in these communications." Privately, Lincoln admitted that, being "wholly opposed to dueling," he would "do anything to avoid it that might not degrade him in the estimation of himself and friends." Lincoln's immediate concern for his reputation, which drove him to accept Shields's challenge, epitomized Jacksonian political behavior—behavior that was subsequently exaggerated by scholars and the public alike to emphasize its hostile and vindictive aspects. Dr. Elias H. Merryman, a "hot-blooded" young Springfield physician and personal friend, persuaded Lincoln not to apologize to Shields on September 22, and the duel was set. With his right as the challenged party to choose the weapons, Lincoln selected "cavalry swords of the largest size," which ridiculously terminated the affair as Shields was much shorter than he.¹⁸ Lincoln further stipulated the following rules:

Position – A plank ten feet long, & from nine to twelve inches broad to be firmly fixed on edge, on the ground, as the line between us which neither is to pass his foot over upon forfeit of his life. Next a line drawn on the ground on either side of said plank & parallel with it, each at the distance of the whole length of the sword and three feet additional from the plank . . . the passing of this own such line by either party during the fight shall be deemed a surrender of the contest.

Lincoln had crafted a plan that would almost certainly guarantee victory without bloodshed. The parties crossed the Mississippi River into Alton, Missouri, threatened as they were with impending arrest in Illinois, whose

¹⁸Shields excerpt from the *Sangamo Journal* is quoted in Donald, *Lincoln*, 91; Lincoln's private response, Merryman's involvement, and Donald's insightful argument are detailed on pages 91–93. Most recently, Wyatt-Brown and Freeman have astutely emphasized the connection between honor, character, and revenge, and the importance of each to American political culture. Wyatt-Brown, *Shaping of Southern Culture*; Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*.

state constitution had criminalized dueling with a penitentiary sentence of one to five years. The double-edged cavalry “dragoon” broadsword was awkward and heavy, and while Lincoln had practiced for nearly a month to perfect his technique, Shields had not. The duel never occurred. Lincoln, emboldened by his broadsword prowess, later claimed, “I did not intend to hurt Shields unless I did so clearly in self-defense,” for, if necessary, “I could have split him from the crown of his head to the end of his backbone.”¹⁹

Despite its peaceful outcome, the affair seems to have remained a painful memory throughout Lincoln’s political career. He had defied his conscience, party discipline, and the law. Neither Lincoln nor his close friends spoke of it afterward. Donald argues that Lincoln’s later tendency to satirize himself was a direct consequence of the undisciplined humor and personal castigation exploited in the “Lost Township” letters.²⁰ Was it that a significant transformation of accepted “gentlemanly” and “masculine” behavior concerning conflict resolution had gradually taken place? Could it be that the Virginia cavalier tradition with its auxiliary Jacksonian knee-jerk aggression—above all, the spontaneous, uninhibited reaction to all personal insults—came to assume an increasingly uncomfortable, anachronistic position on the antebellum frontier? Whatever he thought of the duel itself, Lincoln’s decision to expose its absurdities at the time should lead us to question arguments by historians who have stressed the reciprocal importance of honor, character, and revenge to the early American political tradition.

Both encounters, Stuart-Bennett and Lincoln-Shields, were typical of the frontier duel. The former was provoked by insults to a horse, micro-managed by the wronged party, subverted by a gentleman whose intention was only to scare his opponent, and conducted in the open. The latter was meticulously crafted by a struggling young Whig lawyer who, although holding a lopsided advantage, was willing to surrender the contest by virtue of a foot fault. Neither Bennett nor his seconds, who escaped conviction but not ridicule, garnered the honorable status they had coveted. Lincoln’s aborted duel with Shields, although devoid of violence, was of a similar ilk: Lincoln insulted and provoked a social superior, reluctantly consented to arms, and

¹⁹The dueling rules laid out by Lincoln are quoted in Douglas L. Wilson, *Honor’s Voice: The Transformation of Abraham Lincoln* (New York, 1999), 280–83, as well as in Donald, *Lincoln*, 92. Both parties agreed that their differences were more political than personal, and thus terminated the affair.

²⁰Donald, *Lincoln*, 88–93.

made every effort to undermine the legitimacy of a code that was more egoistic than honorable.

Travelers to Illinois in this era were intrigued by the methods of the region's pioneers, both lower- and upper-class, in resolving conflicts. While violence was generally rare, it did capture the notice of some observers. William Blane, upon visiting Albion County in the 1820s, noted that "a custom much to be blamed among the better class in the Western States is that of wearing of concealed weapons." He was also struck by the rough tactics of the backwoodsman, whereby "the object is to take his adversary by surprise; and then, as soon as he has thrown him down, either to 'gouge' him, that is, to poke his eye out, or else to get his nose or ear into his mouth and bite it off." Some scholars maintain that this "savage" and "inferior" mode of fighting, so disdained by elites, had its own "culture" of honor, and that it was more manly, more democratic, and more typical of frontier regions where hunting, herding, unskilled labor, and semisubsistence agriculture predominated.²¹ These frontiersmen with their rough-and-tumble behavior, along with the canallers and rivermen, set the parameters of manly honor and were the chief transmitters of the frontier's violent culture; elites struggled to match the standard set by their social inferiors. Napoleon Murat noted in 1826 that disputes among western squatters were "amicably terminated by the fist." Other observers noted that community-sanctioned meetings, including "some of the most prominent men in the county," were settled "fairly" in "fisticuffs" style without "resorting to knives or pistols," and often ended in handshakes, drinking, and "good times." Such reports give us a clearer picture of the character of frontier violence, in which republican restraint and deference to community norms minimized its lethality. After examining the records, Illinois historian James E. Davis declared, "Not one scintilla of evidence suggests that a combatant ever limped away, returned with a gun, and fired at an opponent."²² Such evidence challenges deep-seated stereo-

²¹William Blane, *An Excursion Through the United States and Canada During the Years 1822–23* (1824; New York, 1969), 161, 305; Elliot J. Gorn, "'Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch': The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry," *American Historical Review*, XC (Winter 1985), 18–43; and Greenberg, "The Nose, the Lie," 62–63, 66–74.

²²Achille [Napoleon] Murat, *The United States of America* (London, 1833), 53; J.C. McBride, *Past and Present of Christian County, Illinois* (Chicago, 1904), 74–75; John W. Smith, *History of Macon County, Illinois* (Springfield, Ill., 1876), 156; and Davis, *Frontier Illinois*, 286–87.

types concerning the nature of class, honor, masculinity, and opportunity in American history.

Both Indiana and Kentucky passed dueling oath measures that included legislators, civil and military officials, judicial branch employees, and lawyers, as well as laws against carrying concealed weapons, such as dirks, pistols, large knives, and sword-in-canes for all persons except travelers.²³ Linking the concealed-weapon laws directly to dueling, and citing the numerous revisions of the dueling oaths that exempted lawyers and other groups from expulsion as evidence of the honor code's prevalence, some scholars maintain that legislation to control dueling resulted in *more* instances of outright manslaughter. Dueling, however, was not necessarily the chief concern that prompted concealed-weapon statutes as the listing of crude weaponry and the exemption of travelers suggests. Gentlemen solved disputes at ten paces with pistols that were *not* concealed, and travelers may have sported pistols to confirm their social superiority amid the lower orders of the frontier backwoods. Moreover, the vagueness of the term "traveler" may have protected duelists, many of whom crossed state lines in order to duel. The argument that anti-dueling laws increased manslaughter is interesting in that it divorces the image of the duel as an honorable and chivalrous affair from that of the callous and uncivilized violence that elites dismissed as less sophisticated, less manly, and less honorable. But less sophistication did not mean greater mortality rates; it simply meant more physical contact, which required greater courage. Kentucky lawyer William Preston noted that of his boyhood friends, "some twelve or fourteen have perished in violent affrays

²³The Indiana act adopted in 1820 stated that "any person wearing any dirk, pistol, sword in cane, or any other unlawful weapon, concealed, shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor, and on conviction thereof, shall be fined in any sum not exceeding one hundred dollars, for the use of county seminaries: *Provided however*, that this act shall not be so construed as to affect travelers"; *Laws of Indiana*, 1820, p. 39. The act was amended in 1831 so that seminaries would no longer receive the fines. Indiana's dueling oath requirement was passed in 1816, expanded in 1818, and revised in 1820 to exclude lawyers; *Laws of Indiana*, 1818, pp. 362–65. The Kentucky concealed-weapon statute, adopted in 1813, stated that "any person in this commonwealth, who shall hereafter wear a pocket pistol, dirk, large knife, or sword in cane, concealed as a weapon, unless when traveling on a journey, shall be fined in any sum, not less than one hundred dollars . . ."; *Acts for the Commonwealth of Kentucky*, 1813, pp. 100–101. The dueling oath requirement was passed in 1812, and included "all members of the legislative, executive, and military departments as well as members of the bar" as those who would swear that they had not participated in any way in a duel; *Acts for the Commonwealth of Kentucky*, 1814, pp. 119, 147–48. As Cramer points out, the effective date of this law was often disingenuously misinterpreted, and revisions were enacted that allowed lawyers (major participants in duels) to continue practicing. Cramer, *Concealed Weapon Laws*, 60n.

in the streets, and I have never known one who fell in fair and honorable duel.”²⁴ As Ebenezer Stedman, a papermaker from central Kentucky noted in his diary, not only was “the practice of Gouging & Biting” universal on the frontier, it was “Considered the ondy way of ending the Fight.” “No revolvers [were] then thought of,” for as Stedman argued, “These ware the Days when men ware not so Sientifick [sic] in settling their disputes.”²⁵

There was nothing natural or self-evident about limiting the entitlement of gentlemanly honor to a certain class on the midwestern frontier. Frontier elites lived in a society where instability greatly overshadowed any clear division of class. A veneer of masculinity and respectability was threatened by a social ambiguity that led many Europeans to praise America as a classless, egalitarian republic. If violence was a means to distinguish aspiring elites from the lower orders of society, it failed miserably. Duels, riots, workplace militancy and other examples of violent behavior do not necessarily represent explicit divisions on the social ladder. It was insecurity, not destiny, that was manifest in this moving, settling, and industrializing nation—a fact that observers of the time readily noted. Cultural norms and institutions were threatened, and behavior was often unpredictable, a recipe for disaster for historians who hate it when their subjects do not act the way they should. James Fenimore Cooper, pretending to be a European in his *Notions of the Americans*, admitted that “so singular a compound of intelligence, kindness, natural politeness, coarseness, and even vulgarity” left him “utterly baffled in the attempt to give them a place in the social scale.” Karen Halttunen has gone even further, arguing that the “American democrat” occupied no fixed social position, and thus “no status in the strict sense of the term.”²⁶

²⁴Among the scholars who have argued that concealed weapon laws were directly related to dueling is Cramer, *Concealed Weapon Laws*. On the link between anti-dueling laws and an increase in outright homicide, Cramer is joined by Robert Ireland, “The Problem of Concealed Weapons in Nineteenth-Century Kentucky,” *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, XCI (Winter 1993), 370–85; *Report of the Debates and Proceedings of the Convention for the Revision of the Constitution of the State of Kentucky*, 1849 (Frankfort, Ky., 1849), 822.

²⁵Frances Dugan and Jacqueline Bull, eds., *Bluegrass Craftsman: Being the Reminiscences of Ebenezer Hiram Stedman, Papermaker, 1808–1885* (Lexington, Ky., 1959), 32–33.

²⁶Cooper, *Notions of the Americans*, I, 478. In *Manhood and the American Renaissance* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1989), David Leverenz charts the way that masculine ideals affected antebellum writers, and in doing so argues ineffectively for distinct class divisions. He also argues that men fought within male

Because he lived suspended between the facts of his present social condition and the promise of his future, because he held a vertical vision of life in an allegedly fluid and boundless social system, he was plagued with anxiety concerning his social identity.²⁷

Whether or not the frontier “code of honor” was protected by law or, conversely, existed only because of the absence of law, it was at times difficult to discern the behavior of its adherents from that of their alleged inferiors. When William Blane noted in 1822 that “the Western Americans, particularly those of Indiana, are more rough and unpolished in their manners than those of any country I [have] ever traveled in,” he did not make clear whether he meant westerners in general or a particular class among them. William Faux suggested one possible division when he expressed his considerable relief upon entering the Hoosier state: “At sun-rise I left Louisville . . . well pleased to turn my back on all the spitting, gouging, dirking, dueling, swearing, and staring of old Kentucky.” Charles Augustus Murray later suggested that westerners who were “rough, overbearing, and quarrelsome” could likewise be “brave, generous, proud, frank, and hospitable.” Attending the horse races in Louisville, he was taken aback by “the swearing of some of the lower orders in the West, especially among horse-traders and gamblers,” that would “shock ears . . . so full it is of blasphemy.” In 1820, James Flint found “nothing in human form so profligate” as the western boatmen he encountered: “Accomplished in depravity, their habits and education seem to comprehend every vice. They make few pretensions to moral character; and their swearing is excessive, and perfectly disgusting.”²⁸

A number of scholars of riverboatmen and canallers in the Jacksonian era discount such first-hand reports as exaggerations. Such scholars depict lives on the waterways as much less reckless and violent than they were

culture for the control of larger social norms and developments, and did so alone. This runs counter to arguments by Mary P. Ryan, Karen Halttunen, and others who have pointed to the social, political, and cultural influence that women exerted in this period; see Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study in Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830–1870* (New Haven, Conn., 1982) and works cited in note 31.

²⁷Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, 192.

²⁸Blane, *Excursion through the United States*, 276; Murray, *Travels in North America*, II, 211–12, 220; James Flint, *Letters from America*, in Ruben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels, 1748–1846* (32 vols., Cleveland, 1904–1907), IX, 113.

ordinary and monotonous. To associate this “profligate” behavior exclusively with the lower classes would be both unfair and inaccurate. A bet on a horse race actually provoked a duel between two prominent statesmen in Logan County, Kentucky, when Andrew Jackson won 10,000 dollars from the father of his challenger, Charles Dickinson, who proceeded to insult the general’s wife and “post” the him as “a worthless scoundrel, poltroon, and coward.” The verbal abuse cost Dickinson his life, although a faulty pistol which snapped at half-cock, by rule counting as a shot, granted Dickinson the opportunity to lodge a bullet into Jackson’s chest that would eventually contribute to his death. Lethal violence of any sort occurred too infrequently in the frontier Midwest to justify D. H. Lawrence’s famous remark that “the essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer.” One source after another reminds us that actual crimes of violence were quite rare, and that the rural frontier saw nothing on the scale of the mob actions (including seventy-three major riots between 1828 and 1835 alone) seen at the same time in American cities.²⁹

Some observers of the time were quite attuned to the fact that violence—particularly of the ritualized, gentlemanly sort—usually consisted of little more than posturing and bluster. A 1819 letter signed “Squib” in the Brookville *Enquirer & Indiana Telegraph* poked fun at what passed for gentlemanly demeanor on the frontier, and in the process shed light on the importance of reputation. The writer allowed that “learning in general, talents, honor, virtue, integrity, and morality” were “passports into the first ranks” in some places, and that “music, painting, dancing, and the like,” were “held in high estimation” in others. But, recognizing that such knowledge was far from universal (antebellum Indiana ranked dead last in literacy and education among free states), Squib quipped that to rise in frontier society an aspirant must follow a few “concise and infalible [sic] rules” that would ensure an aspirant the “dignified elevation of a member of the first society.”

You must swear with *energetic eloquence*. This requires either a good invention or a good memory, aided by a long and arduous practice; because variety in oaths is necessary to make your conversation attractive, but chiefly because a beginner cannot avoid shuddering while

²⁹See Allen, *Western Rivermen*; Way, “Evil Humor and Ardent Spirits”; Ross, *Workers on the Edge*; and Mahoney, *River Towns*. The best accounts of the Jackson-Dickinson duel are in Seitz, *Famous American Duels*, chapter 8; and Coleman, “The Code Duello in Ante-Bellum Kentucky,” 128–29. D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York, 1961). On urban riots, see Paul A. Gilje, *The Road to Mobocracy: Popular Disorder in New York City, 1763–1834* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1987).

uttering the horrid oaths and blasphemous imprecations [sic] necessary in conversation to shew the true gentleman, and render himself conspicuous. . . . If the conversation is desultory, you may state your Bachanalian [sic] exploits, or indulge in vulgar and obscene puns, or a recitation of blackguardisms. By this means you will effectually put to flight every one that is not qualified for polished society. . . . At all times and places, *express* an extraordinary sense of *honor*, and at the same time declare with the most unequivocal expressions, your determination to wipe out every stain it receives by a challenge. Alas, be frequent and loud in your complaints of the tyranny and oppression of the laws against dueling. By this means you may be free from the apprehension of insults from fools or cowards [emphasis original].³⁰

In reducing the image of the duelist—an archetype of masculine self-sufficiency on the antebellum frontier—to a single “how-to” list, this outline of rules uses satire to expose the extent to which appearance, rather than action, underlay cultural expectations for gentlemanly behavior. But such personal concerns also served the needs of the public, at least as those needs were observed from above. As decades of feminist scholarship have demonstrated, public spaces are theoretically open and accessible to all, defy exact boundaries between male and female spheres, and threaten, rather than reinforce, sex-oriented distinctions.³¹ While the masculine culture of honor has been attributed to the political persona, military prowess, familial defense, and physical courage of a small group of elite American men, it was attained more by image and appearance than action, and was thus more of a creation than an empirical fact. Scholars such as Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Joanne Freeman, Mark Kann, and Dana Nelson have each suggested the extent to which even the most established early American statesmen struggled to polish and inflate their public reputations, with the latter two scholars, in particular, emphasizing the centrality of a white, hierarchical masculinity that

³⁰The literacy/education information appears but is not cited in Cayton, *Frontier Indiana*, 290. Brookville *Enquirer & Indiana Intelligencer*, March 5, 1819.

³¹For analyses of gender and public space, see Mary P. Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825–1880* (Baltimore, Md., 1990), esp. chapter 2; Ryan, *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City During the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, Calif., 1997); Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*; and more recently, Susan Sessions Rugh, “Civilizing the Countryside: Class, Gender, and Crime in Nineteenth-Century Rural Illinois” *Agricultural History*, LXXVI (Winter 2002), 58–81.

elites imagined would quell the excesses of democracy while prescribing social and sexual boundaries.³²

On the antebellum frontier, then, dueling statesmen facing unpredictable social, political, and economic changes responded by creating a facade of masculinity in keeping with what Halttunen describes as the “theatricality” of middle- and upper-class social life in nineteenth-century America. Frontier duelists were in this sense not unlike Halttunen’s parlor women, who ruled dress, etiquette, and social ritual by the “sentimental typology of conduct”—that is, a set of rules that reduced all aspects of social interaction to outward marks of inner character.³³

The ideological tenets and political emotions of Jacksonian America were strangely applied by men seeking elite status on the antebellum frontier. The frontier duel was, in practice, often antithetical to the intensity, simplicity, and immediacy that subsequent observers have so inseparably linked to this violent period in American history. The code of honor was more expensive and inconvenient than it was dangerous. With the Colt revolver not in mainstream circulation until the late 1840s, and because imported dueling pistols easily exceeded the budget of an aspiring frontier gentleman, many had to wait weeks for an heirloom set to arrive courtesy of a sympathetic southerner. Henry Clay, for example, was known to loan his own set if the cause was just (although with his shooting record, he should have been practicing). Most duelists resorted to bulky horse pistols and Kentucky rifles, which, even under optimum conditions, took a full minute to load and prime.³⁴ In addition to criminal fines, dueling oaths (or anti-dueling

³²See Wyatt-Brown, *The Shaping of Southern Culture*; Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*; Mark E. Kann, *A Republic of Men: The American Founders, Gendered Language, and Patriarchal Politics* (New York, 1998); and Dana D. Nelson, *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (Durham, N.C., 1998).

³³Halttunen’s *Confidence Men and Painted Women* clearly aims to provide a more gender-neutral behavioral analysis insofar as it concerns nineteenth-century Americans. Her work, perhaps more than any other, deserves credit for blurring sex-specific conduct limitations that many Americans still consider to be absolute. See esp. chapters 1, 2, 4, and 6; on the “sentimental typology of conduct” see pps. 40–42, 58, 60, 144, 158–59, and 189. See also Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1999).

³⁴The pre- and post-Colt eras are discussed in Eugene W. Hollon, *Frontier Violence: Another Look* (New York, 1974), 118–20; and Bellesiles, “Origins of Gun Culture,” 83.



Satisfaction, engraving by John Halpin, after painting by R. W. Buss
[Robert William], mid-nineteenth century.

Courtesy the Division of Graphic Arts, National Museum of American History,
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

provisions) made the practice permanently expensive by prohibiting offenders from holding positions of profit, and in some cases, requiring the survivor of a fatal duel to financially support the family of the deceased. Typically, these men put more energy into their published condemnations of enemies than their marksman skills, often delayed or ducked challenges, and consented to duels not with the intention to harm their opponent but to seek “satisfaction.” For the minority who did arrive at the field of honor ready to kill, the two alternatives were equally dishonorable. To shoot and kill was to lose honor in the eyes of the community, to be labeled an “assassin,” a “depraved character,” or as an Ohio editor put it, a “poor bewildered coward” who, “afraid to face ridicule from his fashionable circles . . . prefers to meet death and judgment rather than encounter the laugh of a fool.” To shoot and miss or have mechanical trouble and be forced to improvise with rough-and-tumble tactics was perhaps even more devastating for a

gentleman, for it associated him with his inferiors, thus defeating the privilege of the duel.³⁵

In 1833 the long correspondence of two rival Kentucky newspaper editors, George Trotter of the *Kentucky Gazette* and George Prentice of the *Journal and Focus*, was published in papers across the Midwest. The two agreed on rifles at twenty-five paces, but Trotter, “complaining of the want of vision,” was able to negotiate fifteen; objecting that this distance was still “too great for his sight,” Prentice then proposed that they fight with small swords, which Trotter deemed “too close.” A day later, when the duel finally took place, “the ball of Mr. Trotter’s pistol made a slight contusion on the side of Mr. Prentice, whose pistol snapped—after which they threw their pistols at each other and engaged in an ordinary scuffle.” Neither party was injured. The *Indiana Journal* commented that “the manner of his attack upon Mr. Prentice his warmest friends cannot pretend to justify or defend.”³⁶ Elite scuffles may have been free of injury, but not insult.

To reconcile the honorable gentleman with the image of the self-sufficient, isolate, and omnipotent frontiersman as was Cooper’s Leatherstocking (and his numerous descendents) required a tremendous leap of faith in that kind of religion “whose temples are allowed to remain but in which no one longer believes,” to quote Tocqueville. The duel itself, as it was played out on the frontier, could hardly exist in fiction, where killers were far removed from the complexities of politics, family relations, love, and work; where existence required a repudiation of all worldly responsibilities in a setting of unanticipated dangers, and where violence retained a certain innocence, devoid of all social consequences. The western novel stripped its killer of all grudges, reducing the struggle to one of man against nature, while the frontier duelist, unhappy with the nature of man, sought violent recourse to alter or strengthen his worldly image.³⁷

³⁵Truman, in one of the earliest studies of the duel, argues that legislation and/or governmental authority had the power to prohibit persons from making a living, including political office. He quotes U.S. Senator Felix Grundy of Tennessee, who argued that it was “severer punishment, in the eyes of some people, even than ten years’ confinement in a penitentiary.” It could be for this reason (and others) that political duelists often crossed state lines in order to duel. Truman, *Field of Honor*, 84–85; Elisha Bates, *The Moral Advocate: A Monthly Publication on War, Duelling, Capital Punishments, and Prison Discipline* (Mount Pleasant, Oh., 1821–22), 186.

³⁶The Trotter-Prentice duel was covered first by the *Louisville Public Advertiser*, August 29, 1833, and subsequently by the *Indiana Democrat* on August 31 and the *Indiana Journal* on September 2.

³⁷Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, II, 581; David Brion Davis, *Homicide in American Fiction: A Study in Social Values, 1798–1860* (New York, 1957); Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*.

South Carolinian George McDuffie, a state senator and loyal Calhounite, appeared in Trotter's *Kentucky Gazette* more than ten times in seven years, for three separate "incidents" that landed him on the field of honor but once. Doubt was cast on his appearance in the news as "ferocious and insatiable, cold-blooded and heartless" when his first opponent noted that the gentleman's dress was "calculated to repel or divert a bullet," made as it was of "folds of thick silk." Lightly grazed by a bullet in the arm, McDuffie convinced his surgeon on site to announce him "incapable of standing a second shot"—an act that his opponent's party described as "infamous and dishonorable." In his second encounter, McDuffie challenged General Thomas Metcalfe to "an interview . . . in the mode customary among gentlemen," only to object for weeks to the choice of weaponry, "never having fired a rifle in his life"—although, as the challenger, the decision was out of his hands. In 1829, McDuffie, after denigrating his opponent's home state, accused Missouri Congressman Edward Bates of "poor shooting," of "bracing of cowardly nerves with artificial stimulants," as well as the "liberal use of strong liquid"—all the while refusing to accept the congressman's challenge.³⁸ Perhaps the use of McDuffie by the *Kentucky Gazette* served as an object lesson for its frontier readers.

In *The Frontier Mind*, historian Arthur K. Moore examined the extent to which the "buckskin Kentuckian" influenced the cultural development of the West. Comparing travelers' accounts to personal histories, secondary scholarship, and western fiction, he reviewed a host of representations, including the "romance" and "wilderness" myths of the frontier, as well as the Kentuckian as playful savage, epic warrior, agent of progress, and child of nature. In this cultural analysis, Moore argued that while the Kentuckian was a unique contributor to the social formation of the West, he was a "great deal more complex than the simple-minded Indian fighter imagined in frontier chronicles."³⁹ Nonetheless, in a society unwilling to confront its paradoxical and romanticized frontier legacy, the antebellum frontiersman stood at some distance from reality, and was a "familiar disturber of the peace." "Accustomed to see the steamboat with its prodigious and untiring power," wrote Timothy Flint, "the Kentuckian draws his ideas of power from this

³⁸Portions of the McDuffie duels cited here were covered in the *Kentucky Gazette*—the first duel on August 1, September 5 and 26, and October 10 and 17, 1822; the Metcalfe duel on March 16, 1822; the Bates duel on May 29. The last also appears in brief in Steward, *Duels and the Roots of Violence*, 50.

³⁹Arthur K. Moore, *The Frontier Mind: A Cultural Analysis of the Kentucky Frontiersman* (Lexington, Ky., 1957), vii.

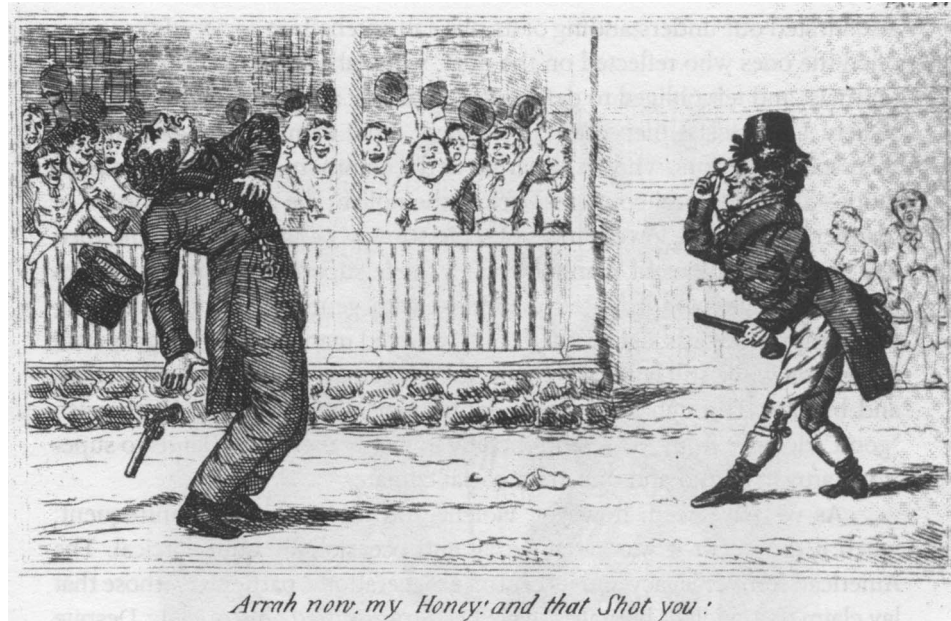
source; and when the warmth of whiskey in his stomach is added to his natural energy, he becomes in succession, horse, alligator, and steam-boat." Far from a meticulous journal entry, this reads more like a poetic lampoon of the frontier myth and its impossible imagery. The Cincinnati *Chronicle* contributed to such imagery when describing a young Kentuckian in an 1838 article:

I'm very like a whale, with a little shade of the big elephant, and slight touch of the wild catamount; I'm a real catastrophe—a small creation, Mount Vesuvius at the top, with red-hot lava pouring out of the crater and routing nations; my eyes are two blast furnaces—tears red-hot melted iron—and every tooth in my head a granite pillar; my feet are Virginia plantations—legs,—branch rail roads of whale-bone—fists, Rocky Mountains—and arms, Whig liberty poles, with cast steel springs. Every step I take is an earthquake—every blow I strike is a clap of thunder—and every breath I breathe is a tornado. . . .⁴⁰

If midwestern frontier duelists were concerned mostly with saving face, to what do we owe the longevity of their image as brave, self-sufficient upholders of manly honor? The answer lies in part in the easy adaptability of the practice to the moral certitudes of fiction, where killers were far removed from the complexities of politics, family relations, love, and work; where existence required a repudiation of all worldly responsibilities in a setting of unanticipated dangers; and where violence retained a certain innocence, devoid of social consequences. From Cooper's *Leatherstocking* on, the western novel reconciled the ideal of the honorable gentleman with that of the self-sufficient frontiersman, as it had developed in countless folktales.⁴¹

⁴⁰Moore, *Frontier Mind*, 107; Timothy Flint, *Recollections of the Last Ten Years* (Boston, 1826), 78; Cincinnati *Chronicle*, January 13, 1838 (referenced more fully in Moore, 108–109). The "alligator horse" was taken from a Greek myth, specifically that of the lascivious centaur, a creature half human and half horse.

⁴¹Only in fiction and the frontier imagination could the Kentucky frontiersman join his social superiors as a contributor to a nation on the move, and yet the bragging, fighting, Indian-hating frontiersman symbolized the Jacksonian national expansion for which statesman elites assumed credit. Nonetheless, there were serious contradictions in the representation of each. Daniel Boone, perhaps the greatest example, was given character traits indicative of the ambiguities inherent in cultural constructions of violence and masculinity. In the definitive Boone biography, John Mack Faragher exposes the limits and hypocrisy of the frontier myth by chronicling the life of a man who was neither a violent loner nor a bloodthirsty Indian fighter, but a community leader, real estate devel-



"Arrah, Now, My Honey! and That Shot You!" Cartoons similar to this one, poking fun at the theatrical nature of dueling, were an accurate reflection of public sentiment in the antebellum era. Unknown artist. Engraving published in *God's Revenge Against Duelling* by Mason Locke Weems (Philadelphia, 1821).

Writers stripped the duelist of his real-life grudges and insecurities, and reduced his struggle to one of man against nature. Cooper, William Gilmore Simms, and many others used justifiable vengeance to further the notion of progress through conflict, and to promote the idea that some actions, while harsh, were necessary to prevent malice and wanton discrimination.

The language with which dueling was documented in non-fiction has

oper, a family man and absentee husband, an adopted Shawnee Indian, and a hunter whose Quaker upbringing taught him to respect life. With qualities both manly and gentlemanly, Boone was both a "civilizer" and "philosopher" in the Jacksonian age of Indian removal where the "idea of negotiating on equal terms with native peoples had become heresy." Moreover, in befriending and respecting the very symbol of manifest destiny—the Indian savage—Boone upset the frontier myth, its violent exaggerations and social limitations. Although folktales and exceptionalist ideals have celebrated his violent heroics, Boone's life deflates the historical link between masculinity and violence. John Mack Faragher, *Daniel Boone: The Life and Legend of an American Pioneer* (New York, 1992), particularly 320–62.

also limited our understanding of its place in antebellum society. Elites were often the ones who reflected on the duel, wrote about it in newspapers and journals, and felt obliged to defend its legitimacy and function in American society. Upper-class men dueled to appear more manly while denouncing their social inferiors, who, in adhering to the common-sense core of masculinity—sheer physical courage—lacked the polish, the gentleman's grace of manner. Indeed, the lower orders of society might be said to have embodied the physical realities of manhood while their superiors, more dependent upon its image, compromised manliness with gentlemanly decorum. Yet, this compromise was significant, for it promoted manners and integrity over aggression while still laying claim to traditional masculine values of strength and bravery. Through such language, frontier elites sought to distinguish "good" violence from "bad," and thereby to justify their own claims to superior status in a fluid and uncertain social climate.

As we have seen, however, violence on the frontier was infrequent; when it did occur it was rarely lethal and occasionally quite farcical. The American frontier legacy and its central exaggerations, particularly those that lay claim to a "violent heritage," have been transmitted ahistorically. Despite scholarship maintaining that frontier relations in general were characterized by cooperation as much as they were by conflict, and despite the availability of sources indicating the skepticism with which people of the time often greeted pretensions of frontier honor, Americans still picture the frontier as a place where gentlemen duelists fearlessly settled their differences with swords and pistols. Clearly, this image favors the exception and not the rule.⁴²

The significance of examining more carefully the conduct and portrayal of frontier violence, both real and imagined, is twofold. First, it reveals the difficulties and ambiguities that plagued men seeking power in an expanding frontier society. The American democratic experiment opened the way to a universal scramble for distinction in which many people, particularly elites, were doomed to disappointment. Second, it compares the reality of frontier life to popular images in order to dispute the notion that violence was frequent and inevitable, and that any one class or group of people was respon-

⁴²For more recent attempts at implementing a cultural frontier thesis, see David J. Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (New Haven, Conn., 1992); Susan Lee Johnson, *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush* (New York, 2000); and Albert L. Hurtado, *Intimate Frontiers: Sex, Gender, and Culture in Old California* (Albuquerque, N.M., 1999).



"But while in the act of aiming it, Cynthy threw a pillow in his face. . . ." *The Drama of Pokerville: The Bench and Bar of Jurytown, and Other Stories*, by Joseph M. Field (Philadelphia, 1847).

sible for America's frontier heritage. The real history of the duel exposes much of what is wrong with histories based on the violent, the elite, and the extraordinary. Not only was this form of violence infrequent and ineffective, it was part of a desperate attempt by mainstream Americans to *become* manly and honorable in a nation that has since been celebrated—in books, movies, stories, political speeches, and images—as superior for such "patriotic" qualities, even if gained through bloodshed.

Appearance, at ground level, in the public eye, and in the minds of novelists, had more to do with the fears and anxieties of a certain class of elite white men than with any abstract notion of honor. These men who dueled to attain or maintain this honor had perhaps the *least* control over it. Capitola Black, the heroine of E.D.E.N. (Emma) Southworth's popular novels of the 1850s, exposed the ambiguity of the concept by humiliating her "gentlemanly" challenger, Craven Le Noir, when she "raised her pistol, took deliberate aim at his white forehead, and fired—Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!" striking him with "poor powder and dried peas," so that both the gentleman and his beloved affair of honor were "beauty spoiled." In Joseph M. Field's "The Great Small Affair Chastisement" (1847), a duel between adversaries Dr. Slunk and Dr. Fitzcarol is thwarted by "Cynthy," a female slave of the former, who, catching her master "in the act of aiming [the pistol] threw a pillow in his face," thus embarrassing both gentlemen. In ridiculing both the *code duello* and its self-seeking adherents, humorists like Field were not far from reality.⁴³ An article in the March 1858 issue of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* was representative of the public sentiment for abolishing dueling. The writer accused dueling proponents of assuming that "an argument made by a rhetorician might be unintelligible or inconclusive, but that a syllogism propelled by powder, if properly aimed, could hardly fail to carry conviction to the dullest intellect."⁴⁴

The last recorded duel in Indiana was prompted when editor William Terrell of the *Lafayette Courier-Journal* sent the dog of rival William Lingle of the *Lafayette Journal* out of his shop doused in turpentine and with cans tied to its tail, causing it to jump into the Wabash River and drown. The two gentlemen resolved their quarrel without firing a single shot, in a warm embrace and a "night of partying."⁴⁵

A study of the motives and results of ritualized personal violence on the American frontier offers us an alternative lens through which to view the

⁴³E.D.E.N. Southworth, *The Hidden Hand: or, Capitola the Madcap*, ed. Joanne Dobson (1859; New Brunswick, N.J., 1988), 361–62; Joseph M. Field, *The Drama of Pokerville: The Bench and Bar of Jurytown, and Other Stories* (Philadelphia, 1847), 74–88.

⁴⁴*Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, March 1858, quoted in Jeannette Husey, *The Code Duello in America* (Washington, D.C., 1980), 6.

⁴⁵Southworth, *The Hidden Hand*, 374–77. An excellent account of the 1858 Terrell-Lingle duel can be found in Fred D. Cavinder, *The Indiana Book of Records, Firsts, and Fascinating Facts* (Bloomington, Ind., 1985), 65–66.

negative aspects of the cultural and democratic experiment in westward expansion. Far from the devastating atrocities of war, slavery, lynching, and genocide, the duel gives us a chance to separate the reality of frontier violence from its image. In many ways, the frontier served as a great leveler for that small proportion of elite white men who struggled to preserve an old tradition in a new environment. And yet, their dilemma ran deeper than their words, pistols, and blows. These men struggled with their inability to impose exclusive views of violence, masculinity, and honor on a rapidly expanding and diversifying population. In doing so, they were far from emblematic of the frontier experience.

