

A Deadly Contest: The Stanly-Spaight Duel?

By Diana Bell-Kite *

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If a classmate called you an insulting name, what would you do? Talk to the person? Tell a teacher? Not so long ago, some North Carolinians settled their disagreements in a way that we may find shocking today—by dueling to the death. A duel, in this case, is a fight between two people with strict rules, weapons, and witnesses.

On August 8, 1802, Richard Dobbs Spaight, forty-four-year-old former North Carolina governor and candidate for the state senate, heard a report about a political rival that made him extremely angry. John Stanly—a twenty-eight-year-old Federalist who had beaten Spaight in a race for Congress two years before—had been seen on a busy New Bern street corner loudly criticizing Spaight’s political allegiance. (Spaight had recently switched parties from the Federalists to the Jeffersonian Republicans.) Furious, Spaight wrote Stanly a letter, calling his comments an “absolute falsehood” and “a direct attack upon my character.”

Over the next month, the two men wrote each other repeatedly. Their letters soon became public. Each man published his version of the incident for the whole town to read, in newspaper articles and handbills. Stanly proclaimed that Spaight had “a malicious, low and unmanly spirit,” and Spaight replied that Stanly was “both a liar and a scoundrel.” These words were too much for Stanly to bear. On September 5, 1802, he challenged Spaight to a duel later that day.

But how could two grown men get so upset about a little name-calling? Words can’t hurt you, right? Wrong. For upper-class white men living in the early 1800s, words could be very dangerous. Men like Stanly and Spaight attached life-or-death importance to their personal honor (their status in the community based on other people’s respect for them). Any insult to a man’s character—especially being called a liar or coward—threatened his reputation as an honorable man. If you were publicly dishonored, friends would leave you, and you would lose business connections. If, as many duelers were, you were a politician, you would not be reelected. To the public, your name would be mud, and your life would be ruined.

Therefore, when one man publicly insulted another, it became deadly serious. With the help of a friend called a *second*, the offended man could challenge the other to a duel. The men would meet at a set time and place and—using either swords or pistols—try to kill each other. While duels were violent, they were carefully planned. Duelers followed rules—called the *code duello*—that spelled out how to conduct a duel. For example, some duels ended only when one contestant died; other duelers felt satisfied if blood had been drawn or shots fired. Between 1800 and 1860, North Carolina politicians fought twenty-seven duels.



John Stanly. *Image courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.*



Richard Dobbs Spaight. *Image courtesy of the State Archives, North Carolina Office of Archives and History.*

Stanly and Spaight preferred death to public dishonor. At five thirty in the evening, the two men and their seconds met near New Bern's Masonic Hall on the edge of town. They walked a planned number of steps away from each other, took aim, and fired their flintlock smoothbore pistols. They missed. The men fired again. Spaight's ball grazed Stanly's shirt collar, but still both men were unharmed. Their third shots missed once more. On the fourth round of fire, Stanly's ball struck Spaight in the side. The respected statesman crumpled to the ground. He died the next day.

Since Spaight had been a well-loved public figure, many people got upset about his death. The General Assembly quickly passed an act "to Prevent the Vile Practice of Dueling within this state." But the act was not enforced and did little to actually stop conflicts. Stanly continued his career in law and politics, living until 1833, when he died from complications of a stroke. Dueling, however, and the culture of honor that encouraged it, would not die out in the South until the huge social and cultural changes of the Civil War era.

To learn more about the Stanly-Spaight duel, visit Tryon Palace Historic Sites and Gardens in New Bern. A reenactment of the conflict is staged there each Labor Day.

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