



# Alexandria Times

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## Out of the Attic

### Pistols and dressing gowns

*Alexandria Times, June 28, 2018*

Image: Library of Congress.

Audiences familiar with the story of the musical “Hamilton” know that in the end, the protagonist dies in a duel with his long-time frenemy Aaron Burr. While that duel occurred in New Jersey, there were other famous duels closer to Alexandria. The move of the federal government to its new home in Washington, D.C. led to a rise in duels between political rivals, who could disagree and settle those disagreements in person.

Bladensburg, Maryland, was considered the national dueling ground, with more than 100 duels used as a “court of last resort.” In 1820, Commodore Stephen Decatur died from wounds he suffered at Bladensburg in a duel with his mentor, Commodore James Barron. Decatur’s wife was unable to afford the upkeep of the house they had built close to the White House, and sold the house to Alexandria’s famous tavernkeeper John Gadsby in 1836.

But the most famous duel in this area was in McLean, between Senator John Randolph of Roanoke (pictured above) and Secretary of State Henry Clay. Randolph was a particularly memorable character. A hereditary or childhood illness, which may or may not have been caused by his parents being close cousins, prevented him from going through puberty during his sixty years of life.



He was a second cousin of Thomas Jefferson, and advocated a particularly aristocratic form of society that protected the status of southern elites like himself. He strongly opposed abolition, yet set his enslaved people free and provided money and property for them in Ohio upon his death. He also fought his first duel at the age of eighteen supposedly in an argument over the mispronunciation of a word.

Randolph and Clay had a long personal history before the duel in 1826. When Clay became Speaker of the House in 1811, one of his first acts was to kick Randolph’s dogs off the floor of the House chambers. The two men were both founders of the American Colonization Society in 1815, the organization that advocated freeing the enslaved people of the United States and sending them to Africa, which was realized by the founding of Liberia.

The cause of the duel was a disagreement on Clay’s desire to send an American delegation to a congress of the Americas in Panama. In his speech on the matter, Randolph was reported to have called the John Quincy Adams administration, “a coalition between the puritan and blackleg.”

Clay chose to be personally offended over the reference to him as a blackleg, and challenged Randolph to a duel. Instead of insisting that a senator could not be challenged outside of the Senate chambers for things he said inside, as was his right, Randolph agreed to the fight. His only stipulation was



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that it be on Virginia soil. According to Senator Thomas Benton of Georgia, Randolph insisted, “if he fell, to fall upon the soil of Virginia, and as he had no intention of firing at Mr. Clay he felt it would not violate her statute against dueling.” Perhaps the most entertaining part of the duel for modern readers is that Randolph wore what has been described as a flannel dressing gown for the occasion. Though Randolph had told Benton that he had no desire to kill Clay, after the pistols were distributed, Randolph accidentally set off the hair trigger, firing into the ground. After settling their nerves, both men fired at each other. Clay missed, Randolph missed as well.

In the second round, Clay’s bullet went through Randolph’s clothing, near his hip, and Randolph, realizing that he was not hurt, fired into the air, showing that he did not mean to kill Clay. Randolph said, “You owe me a coat, Mr. Clay.” To which Clay responded that he was glad that the debt was not greater. The two men clasped hands, their honor restored, exemplifying what Benton called, “the utter, unconditional absurdity and folly of dueling.”

The 1820s were different times from the one in which we live today. That a sitting senator and the Secretary of State would fire pistols at each other in a socially accepted practice as a means of settling a personal disagreement underlines how the world that they lived in differed from ours.

*“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.*

*These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.*