



200TH ANNIVERSARY
OF THE
HAMILTON – BURR DUEL
AT
WEEHAWKEN

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Where Hamilton Fell:
The Exact Location of the
Famous Duelling Ground

by John Reid

The Hoboken Evening News
June 10, 1898

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WHERE HAMILTON FELL
The Exact Location of the Famous Duelling Ground.
DESCRIBED BY TRUSTEE JOHN REID

Transcribed from
The Hoboken Evening News
June 10, 1898

Transcription by
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A note from the Weehawken Historical Commission:

We recognize that the following article is **very** biased against Aaron Burr and in favor of Alexander Hamilton. We present it for two reasons: first, because it contains a very detailed account of the location of the duel, at least according to this writer. It is also an example of the strong feelings engendered by the duel in the North Hudson area even almost 100 years after the fatal shot was fired.

For more information on the Duel, please visit our web site:
Duel2004.weehawkenhistory.org

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A project of the Weehawken Historical Commission
Edward A. Fleckenstein, Chairman

Particulars of the Events That Led to the Killing of America's Great Statesman – Burr's Means of Forcing an Issue – The Death Scene and Return to New York.

In the bright sunshine, on the early morning of July 11, 1804, two handsome, cultured Americans stood on a grassy plateau under the towering Palisades contemplating each other ten paces apart; each held in his dexter hand a dueling pistol. It might be truly said that one of these men had blood in his eye and was out for what he termed "satisfaction." The result of that early morning's encounter sent a thrill of anguish into many manly hearts and threw the young nation into mourning, by sending one of those distinguished men to a premature grave. The other might better have died at the same time, as after this fatal day he became an outcast, and until the time of his natural death, thirty two years after this eventful morning, he wandered around throughout the civilized world, a butt for the scorn, indignation and contempt of mankind. He deserved it, too.

HAMILTON AND BURR

Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr were both remarkable men. Each had natural ability of the very first order. Indeed, the latter of the two, at that very time, was Vice President of the United States, and came perilously near being President; both had been distinguished soldiers in the War of the revolution. At that same time, both were leading lawyers at the New York Bar, both were courted society men in the highest social circles of the time; both were descended from a very distinguished parentage, and were carefully prepared for the issues of life. However, these men were essentially different. Hamilton was a true statesman and all that name implied. That was accorded to him by those most capable of judging, all over the civilized world.

Burr, although an able, adroit man, was never a statesman. When the truth is impartially told he must be classed as a conscienceless, dangerous demagogue. Although at that time he had not committed many of those overt acts which carried condemnation with them, still close observers had long since made up their minds that he was a man not to be trusted. Hamilton was one of those who easily penetrated the disguised hypocrisy of Burr, he had more opportunities to observe Burr than most of his fellow citizens. Both had been in the State and National Legislatures at the same time. It was a formulative period, and great questions were being continually presented, which required all the patriotism and mental resources of the greatest in the land. Hamilton was never found wanting. As a constructive statesman he easily ranks first among Americans. Talleyrand said that the three greatest men of that time were Napoleon Bonaparte, Charles James Fox and Alexander Hamilton, but he placed the American first of the three. That is very high praise.

The great Frenchman, Guizot, said of him: "Hamilton wrote more than half of those profound and luminous treatises, which are recognized by all parties as the best commentary on the Constitution." * * * "There is not in the Constitution of the United States an element of order, strength or durability which he did not contribute to introduce into it." At that early time he was in favor of giving the right of suffrage to all freemen, without distinction of color.

This great man, one of the greatest human beings who ever lived, in a moment of weakness, so far forgot himself that he deferred enough to the barbarism of that time, to accept a challenge to fight a duel to settle some minor point of political etiquette, which should never been heard of.

As far as active office holding was concerned, Hamilton had retired. He had a wife and eight children, which his salary as Secretary of the Treasury was inadequate to support if he remained honest. He retired, and was at the time in question, in the enjoyment of the most lucrative practice at the New York Bar. He did not, however, lose any of the interest which he formerly had in the welfare of the State or Nation. On the contrary, he was in great request on all the platforms where National or State subjects were at issue and needed to be intelligently discussed.

BURR'S DEMAGOGUEISM AND AMBITION

Burr had the usual fate of all demagogues. Sooner or later the people manage to size them up and relegate them to the rear, while in power they may use all means possible to conceal their motives and may labor assiduously to intrench themselves, but the fates are against them. Burr is not the only instance in the history of the Republic, where vaulting ambition overleaped itself to come down in the end between the stools. Even today, the same phenomenon is being repeated constantly; the higher the exaltation, the greater the crash when it comes.

Burr calculated to have the nomination for the Presidency in 1804, the same as he had in 1800, along with Jefferson. He evidently intended not to be hustled to one side, as in his contest with Jefferson in 1800. Jefferson knew the man thoroughly, and managed to take no chances with the unscrupulous demagogue who came so near shouldering him out in 1800. Burr was not nominated the second time on the ticket with Jefferson. He organized "a soap movement," and procured an independent nomination for the Governorship of the State of New York. By intrigue and finesse, at which he was a master, he managed to get the indorsement of the Federalist Convention, although he had always been a bitter Anti-Federalist. The Republicans, the Democrats of that day, would not nominate Burr, but gave the "regular nomination" to Morgan Lewis. Burr was a man of great energy and infinite resources, and a favorite with the rowdy shouters and with the slums. He took the stump and spoke to great, noisy demonstrative audiences at all the principal centres of population throughout the State. Hamilton took the platform in opposition. He was nettled at finding a man, as he knew Burr to be, walk off by sheer audacity with the Federalist nomination. The contest was a long, arduous and bitter one. Hamilton triumphed. Burr was beaten. Morgan Lewis was elected Governor.

BURR'S BITTER ENMITY TO HAMILTON

From that time on, Burr became Hamilton's bitter and unrelenting enemy. He soon found a pretense for challenging Hamilton to mortal combat. He commenced by pretending that Hamilton had insulted by disrespectful remarks. He sent a message requiring an apology. This took place on June 18, 1804. Four letters were exchanged between the parties and nine days elapsed before a challenge was sent.

HAMILTON CHALLENGED

Hamilton had been warned to beware, that he was dealing with a dangerous, unscrupulous man, who would stop at nothing, he had a clear view of the determination and desperation of his enemy. He saw that a hostile message was inevitable, and being in obedience to the so-called "laws of honor," he accepted the challenge as soon as it was offered. He was conscientiously opposed to dueling, as he had good reason to be, as two years before his eldest son Philip had been killed in a duel with Captain Eacker, but he was in the thrall of the iron rule of military life. He would not send a challenge, but he would not refuse one. He evidently had a false notion of what constituted real manliness; physically there was not a cowardly inch in Alexander Hamilton's make-up, his standards on this subject, however, were not the highest, he deferred too much to the popular barbarism of that time, in relation to this mode of settling "questions of honor."

DINNER OF THE CINCINNATI SOCIETY

On the 4th of July 1804, just one week before the duel, both Hamilton and Burr attended the dinner of the Society of Cincinnati at the City Hotel. Both appeared unconcerned. It was remarkable that Hamilton especially fell in very buoyant, hilarious spirits. He was called upon and with more than usual "gusto" sang "The Drum," which was one of the popular songs of that period. No one present dreamed at that very moment the challenge to mortal combat was in his pocket. Burr sat mostly by himself in a very glum kind of mood. He had little to say to anyone. He was no doubt gloating over that revenge which he had then almost within his grasp.

FINAL ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE DUEL

Hamilton's second was ex-Judge Pendleton, a respectable lawyer whose office was at No. 17 Wall street. Burr's second was William P. Van Ness, also a lawyer, whose office was at No. 10 Pine street. By special arrangement, the hostile meeting was postponed until after the term of the Circuit Court, which was held on July 6. Hamilton had an important case on hand, that disposed of, Mr. Pendleton informed Mr. Van Ness that his principal was ready. Sunday, the 8th, was passed by Hamilton with his family at "The Grange," so called as a mark of esteem for his paternal grandfather, Alexander Hamilton, who resided at "Grange" in Ayshire, Scotland. What a grievous wrong he was about to commit upon his wife and children! On Monday he made his will, leaving everything to his wife and commending her to the care of the children. Tuesday was spent in preliminaries to the meeting, which was to come off early the next morning. A boat and boatman was procured, and Dr. Hosack, one of the leading practitioners of that time, was engaged to be present on the field in case of need. These ghastly preparations must have awakened peculiar ruminations in one with Hamilton's imaginative and reflective turn of mind.

On the same day, Tuesday, Burr wrote to South Carolina to his daughter Theodosia, who had always been the idol of his heart, giving explicit directions as to the disposition of his affairs, and also in reference to the education of his little grandson, her eldest child. He also wrote an elaborate letter to the Governor of South Carolina, Joseph Alston, Theodosia's husband. The letter concludes with this brief explanation:

"I have called out General Hamilton and we meet tomorrow. Van Ness will give you the particulars. The preceding has been written in view of this. If it should be my lot to fall – yet shall I live in you and your son."

It may be observed as a rather striking contrast, that Burr not only did not fall, but that he survived his son-in-law, his daughter, and the little grandson many years, and died long after, a wandering, miserable, neglected old man, despised and condemned by everybody.

THE MEETING

It was arranged between the seconds that Burr should arrive first at the dueling ground, which was on a little plateau under the Palisades on the New Jersey side of the Hudson River opposite Forty-second street, New York. Burr resided at his rural mansion, known as “Richmond Hill,” near what is now the corner of Charlton and Varick streets. He left it for the dueling grounds before 6 o’clock a.m. The Hamilton boat and party reached the place at 7 o’clock. The botman was ordered to wait with his boat at the bank. Burr and his second, Mr. Van Ness, had found the plateau covered by a tangle of woody undergrowth; they had spent considerable time in clearing it, so as to have clear standing room. The principals saluted each other in that formal manner demanded by the “code of honor.” Ten paces were measured off, Van Ness and Pendleton, the seconds, then united in loading the pair of dueling pistols. They then drew for choice of position. Hamilton won the choice, the combatants at once took their places, Hamilton facing New York, Burr facing the hillside, with his back to the river.

It had been previously agreed between the seconds “that after the parties had taken their places the second who gives the word shall ask: Are you ready? And being answered in the affirmative, shall say ‘present,’ and after this, the parties shall present and fire when they please. The word was given by Hamilton’s second, and both parties presented and fired in succession. It was noticed that Burr took deliberate aim, and was the first to fire. Hamilton fired into the air. The time intervening has always been a matter of dispute, but it was very short, as Hamilton fell mortally wounded at the first fire. Burr immediately advanced toward the wounded man, and with well feigned hypocrisy expressed his regret, and then, without any more ceremony, left the field. It was currently reported in New York after the duel that Burr had spent considerable time in target practice for the last few weeks anterior to the fatal encounter.

AFTER THE DUEL

As Hamilton sank to the ground Pendleton ran to his assistance and Dr. Hosack, who was not actually on the ground, but in the vicinity, was at once on hand. He says he “found Hamilton sitting on the ground upheld by the arms of his second.” His countenance, he said, he should never forget; he had just enough strength to say “This is a mortal wound,” and then sank back to the ground, apparently lifeless. The boatman, realizing the importance of time, put forth every effort to reach the city. The cool morning breeze on the shimmering surface of the river had the effect of somewhat reviving the wounded statesman, who several times referred to his wife. “Let her be sent for,” said he, “but break the news gently to her and give her hope.” Dr. Hosak soon found that Hamilton had made no mistake in relation to the fatal character of the wound; it was, indeed, mortal.

It was arranged in crossing the river, that the dying man was to be taken to the house of his friend, William Bayard, who resided on Jane street, near Greenwich street in what was then known as “Greenwich Village,” at that time a suburb of New York proper. Mr. Bayard’s house was an imposing mansion built of wood, which stood on a farm owned by him. He was one of New York’s prosperous merchants. The same mansion had often before resounded with uproarious mirth and had accommodated lively parties of which Hamilton was usually the life and soul. In high toned hilarity and rational enjoyment, the latter was never second to anyone. The landing place at that time was close by the mansion. Hamilton was carried from the boat to the house. It was still early. Most people had not had their breakfast. Many were still sleeping soundly in their beds. A messenger was at once sent for Mrs. Hamilton. The family was then residing at “The Grange,” Hamilton’s summer residence near the new Washington Bridge, above Harlem, the site of the celebrated thirteen plane trees, which the statesman had planted with his own hands in a circle to commemorate the equality and union of the thirteen original states. The distance was quite a long one considering the urgency of the occasion.

The messenger and the parties sent for were borne along as quickly as horse flesh could do it on the primitive roads of that period. About noon, Mrs. Hamilton and six of the children arrived and were ushered into the death room which was the back parlor on the first floor, with windows opening towards the north.

DEATH OF HAMILTON

Here the dying man took his last view and leave of that group which his last ill advised act had so greatly wronged. The spectacle was too painful for him. He closed his eyes in mental agony, but when the children were withdrawn, he consoled his wife with the words: “Remember, Eliza, you are a Christian.” He could not then say anything more. Bishop Moore visited him, hearing his dying sentences and administered to him the communion, according to the rites of the Protestant Episcopal Church.

Hamilton’s wound was beyond human aid; he lingered in great agony until the next day, when he expired about 2 o’clock in the afternoon. Dr. Hosack made a postmortem examination. He found that the bullet had fractured the third rib and then passed through the liver and diaphragm and lodged in the second lumbar vertebrae. Thus Aaron Burr had his revenge, or what he was fond of terming “satisfaction.”

BURR'S MOVEMENTS

As the dying Hamilton was being carried off the fatal field to the boat, the Burr party was passed. Van Ness, Burr's second, opened an umbrella and covered Burr from the dying man's view. Burr was rowed, as rapidly as possible, to the landing nearest to Richmond Hill. He remained at his home for a few days and then went to Philadelphia. He felt that his crime had exiled him from New York, and he did not visit that city for eight years afterwards.

The same day of the duel Burr did the necessary business connected with the conveyance of some of his real estate. This shows the unparalleled audacity and iron nerve of this scheming scoundrel.

HAMILTON'S FUNERAL

Hamilton's city residence was closed for the season, or else his funeral would have been held there. His suburban summer residence, "The Grange," was too far out of town for the convenience of those who wished to participate in the obsequies. The remains were removed from Mr. Bayard's mansion, where he died, to the residence of John B. Church, down town. Mr. Church was Hamilton's brother-in-law, both being married to daughters of General Philip Schuyler. Hamilton had named Church as one of the executors of his will. He no doubt craved the honor and duty of paying his last tribute of respect in this manner to his deceased friend.

The well-known Coleman was at that time editor of the Evening Post, which was then the leading newspaper of New York City. In referring to the sad event, he said: "In the death of General Hamilton, I have lost my ablest advisor and my dearest friend." On the day of the funeral the office was closed and no paper issued.

The obsequies were under the control and management of the Society of the Cincinnati. Colonel Morton and his corps appeared in the park with six pieces of artillery. Two of these remained stationary and fired minute guns during the time of the funeral procession, the other four were a part of the funeral pageant, and formed an imposing feature.

The Cincinnati and the clergy met in King's (Columbia) College nearby in Barclay street, and thus in detail the funeral column was formed, which marched from Greenwich street up to the City Hall park, then down Beekman to Pearl, up Pearl to Whitehall street, after which it swept up Broadway to Trinity Church. Gov. Morris then delivered an appropriate eulogy, and the remains were buried in Trinity Churchyard beside those of his eldest son, Philip, who had been killed in a duel by Capt. Eaker two years previously. The military fired three volleys over the grave. The monument placed there is still one of the interesting features of old Trinity Churchyard. Fifty three years after his burial, the remains of his widow were laid by his side.

HAMILTON'S PREPARATIONS

An examination of the real estate records of New York will show that on the 6th of July, 1804, the unfortunate statesman executed a deed of trust conveying all his property to John B. Church and William Pendleton (his second), for the purpose of meeting his debts, and especially a note due at the Bank of New York for \$900. His scrupulous honesty in business affairs was conspicuous to the last, he had received a set of the British classics from a bookseller, which not being paid for, he directed that they be returned in good order. His will was executed on Saturday, that day week witnessed his funeral.

It was hardly worth Hamilton's while to make a will, as he had practically nothing to bequeath, he merely desired to give utterance to his feelings in view of a possibly fatal result, and he desired to impress upon his children a full sense of their filial duty. In the Surrogate's office in New York may be read the following excerpt from his last will and testament:

“Though if it should please God to spare my life I may look for a considerable surplus out of my property, yet if he should speedily call me into the eternal world, a forced sale, as is usual, may possibly render it insufficient to pay my debts, I pray God that something may remain for the maintenance of my dear wife and children. But if, on the contrary, it happens that there is not enough to pay my debts, I entreat my dear children, if they or any of them shall ever be able, to make up the deficiency. I, without hesitation, commit to their delicacy a wish which is dictated by my own. Though conscious that I have too far sacrificed the interests of my family to public avocations, and on this account have less claim to burden my children, yet I trust, in their magnanimity, to appreciate, as they ought, my request. In so unfavorable an event the support of their dear mother with the most respectful and tender affections is a duty all the sacredness of which they will feel.”

It seems incredible that a man who could write so tenderly of his wife and children could be so inconsiderate to set himself up as a mark for a duellist's bullet in obedience to the miscalled “law of honor.” This proves that the very strongest men have their points of weakness, or as the old adage says, that “The best of me are but men at the best.”

HAMILTON AND THE CINCINNATI

The most impressive meeting which this honorable society ever held was that in honor of General Hamilton. It took place on the last day of July, 1804 in the Old Dutch Reformed Church, which formerly occupied the northwest corner of William and Fulton streets. The address on the occasion was delivered by Dr. John M. Mason, who was an honorary member of the Cincinnati, and at that time the Spurgeon or Beecher of New York.

On the 11th, the city was convulsed with the news of the bloody result. The next day Hamilton died and the Cincinnati were busied for the rest of the week with the obsequies. The meeting in the Old Dutch Church and the oration by Dr. Mason was the finale in the succession of sad events.

Dr. Mason's address was said to be the best of all his oratorical efforts; it is classified by good judges as one of the finest efforts of American eloquence. Mason was considered the most impressive speaker of his day, and his intensity of thought and pugnancy of expression rendered him a model of oratory. The society afterwards erected a marble tablet to Hamilton's memory in the interior of Trinity Church. The inscription is also from the pen of Dr. Mason and has been spoken of as one of the finest things of the kind in our language. It naturally belongs in this place and should be given notice:

“This tablet does not propose to perpetuate the memory of a man to whom the age has produced no superior, nor to emblazon worth eminently conspicuous in every feature of his country's greatness, nor to anticipate posterity in its judgment of the loss which she has sustained by his premature death, but to attest in the simplicity of grief, the veneration and anguish which fill the hearts of the Society of the Cincinnati on every recollection of their illustrious brother, Major-General Alexander Hamilton.”

THE EXACT DUELLING GROUND

In a recent publication, I find the following:

“The spot on which Hamilton fell was subsequently indicated by a monument, placed there by the St. Andrew's Society of New York, of which Hamilton was a member. It stood in what was Thirty-first street, in the old Weehawken District, but the improvements in that vicinity has required its removal.”

Nothing could be more misleading than the above. In the article in the Encyclopedia Britannica on Hamilton by the historian George Shea, which was copyrighted in 1880, it merely said:

“They met early on the morning of July 11th, 1804 at a sequestered place beneath the hills of Weehawken, on the wet bank of the Hudson River, opposite to the City of New York.”

Not much less could be said, and it is of very little or no assistance to anyone who desires to find the exact place where this tragedy took place.

The “International Cyclopaedia” says: “The duel was fought at Weehawken July 11th, 1804.” Other details are given, but that is all which relates to the place of the fatal encounter.

I find that curiosity is growing every year, especially among historical students, to find the exact place where this famous meeting took place. Some thirty or forty years ago, there was not much difficulty in finding the place, as a good many old people were then living around Weehawken, who could point to the very spot. Now these are nearly all gone. I know at present of only one, and he has no historical tastes whatever and innocently wonders why people care anything about it.

VALUE OF CORRECT INFORMATION

Thinking that a time would soon come when the identity of this historical spot would be lost forever, I considered it the proper thing for me to put down in elaborate form a truthful account of my experience in relation to it. I was in conversation with a literary man lately (Professor Paddock, of Jersey City). He was startled to find out the exact and full knowledge which I possessed on the subject. He said that an account like mine was exceedingly valuable, and was not then available to those who desired to find this historical place. He made me promise to supply an account to himself and a diagram. I have done so. On relating the circumstances to Mr. Seide of the Hoboken EVENING NEWS, with characteristic enterprise and public spirit he immediately proffered to publish it in good shape in the NEWS in case I would furnish a diagram and an article which would be of public interest and of such a character as to prevent the loss of the identity of this historical place. The above is the reason why this article appears in this form.

SEARCH FOR THE EXACT GROUND IN 1855

I moved from residing in Philadelphia about the Christmas holidays of 1853. I settled in New York not far from the present Gansevoort Market. In my reading I became interested in the story of Hamilton’s and Burr’s duel and its fatal consequences. The accounts at that time were as evasive and non-committal as they are to-day. You could read that the duel was fought on a date named at Weehawken, N.J. That was all. Everything was noted except for the exact location of the famous spot. One could find out that the St. Andrews Society had erected a monument to mark the place. This had, according to the accounts, been destroyed.

In the summer of 1855, Thomas Farley, an old school-mate of mine, who still lives in Philadelphia, at No. 2050 Catharine street, paid me a visit. He remained with me several weeks. We chatted this Hamilton-Burr matter over frequently, and would look out of our windows over towards Weehawken, wondering all the time where the exact place could be. Finally we resolved that on the next Sunday we would go over and hunt for it. We had an early breakfast and crossed over the ferry to Weehawken from Forty-second street, New York. The old ferry landing on the New Jersey side was north of both the new tunnel of the West Shore Railroad and the present new ferry houses. From there to the Hoboken ferries there was not on the riverside anywhere at that time any sign of improvement innovations, no docks, no steamships, no railroads – the whole shore was in a state of primitive wilderness. “Jack” Frost’s little farm and a house or two besides were the only signs of life or settlement in the vicinity. The famous “Elysian Fields,” about a mile below the dueling ground, were then in their glory as a Sunday resort for New Yorkers; they were in great requisition, toughs of all kinds felt at home there and did about as they pleased; those halcyon days preceded the organization of the present efficient police force of the city of Hoboken. The Fields were filled with a heterogeneous and motley crowd every fair Sunday in the summertime; indeed, carrying those crowds back and forth constituted the principal business of the three ferries, which run from Barclay, Canal, and Christopher streets, New York to the ferry slips in Hoboken, which were then located very near where Hudson street and the elevated road cross each other.

THE WEEHAWKEN RIVER SIDE IN 1855

The little village on the New Jersey side where the Weehawken ferry had its landing was at that time a rather pleasant little rural retreat. Its few little houses nestled very cosily under the hill among the trees. It was par excellence – a sylvan retreat – especially in the summer afternoons when old Sol veered around to the west and the Palisade cliffs and the large trees began to cast their long, cool shadows. The little village had the usual quota of ‘thirst cure’ establishments, most of them of miniature proportions and pretensions. One pretty large and well kept place overshadowed all the others. Since then the well known “Dave” Pollock was for a long time its accommodating landlord. At the time of which I speak, he kept the City Hotel in Hudson street, between Third and Fourth streets, this city. The same old wooden buildings are now being demolished by the Hoboken Land and Improvement Company to make way for better paying structures.

Since the time of which I speak, the grounds around the little village have been stripped of all their trees and vegetation; it would be hard to find anywhere around New York a more forbidding neighborhood than the same at the present time. A great deal of the macadam for the fine roads in Central Park as well as many paving stones for the streets came from the repulsive, ragged looking quarries of that section.

My friend and myself searched nearly all day, up and down, backward and forward, and all across the face of the hill up to Guttenberg. We climbed over rocks, over boulders and loose angular stones, pulling hanging branches out of our way. We came across several snakes, whether poisonous or not we did not know, they usually hid among the loose stones, getting out of our way. We finally became very tired and hungry, sat down upon a stone and talked it over. We concluded that we had searched our share, and that it would be impossible for strangers to find the place sought, unless some kind of directions were previously obtained. We had calculated that we would find the remains of the old St. Andrew's Society's monument. We could not get ourselves to think that all traces of it had long ago disappeared. It never occurred to us to inquire at the village. We found afterwards that they didn't care a rap about Hamilton or Burr, most of them did not either know or care who or what they were. They would look up in blank astonishment as to find anyone so foolish as to go "snooking" around to find a place where two men had settled a quarrel fifty years before that time. We probably did not lose much by not inquiring in the village.

We started for home tired and disappointed. As we meandered back toward the ferry, over the plank road across the mud flat, from terra firma to the deep water for ferryboat landing, we met a well dressed gentleman who told us that he lived on top of the hill; we related to him how we had searched all day in the hot sun trying to locate the historical dueling ground; he smiled and being evidently a cultured man, he expressed his sympathy for us at being disappointed after such a persevering search. Being Sunday, and being out for a stroll in the shadow of the cliff, he said "he wouldn't mind showing us the very place, as he knew it well." He almost apologized for asking us, tired as he could see we were, to come back more than half a mile. We thanked him and asked him to kindly lead the way.

FINDING THE HISTORICAL SPOT

We were soon back to the foot of the cliff. We turned sharply to our left and went south, making a line among the trees and the tangle of vegetable undergrowth as straight as circumstances would permit. I remember passing a well-kept truck-garden under the hill, at a place known as "Deas' Point." And which is now the switching ground of the West Shore Railroad, south of the tunnel. We traveled along a considerable way south of this truck garden. There was not a trace of even a path. Under the hill from the talus of the cliffs above to the river bank there was a level strip of ground of various widths; at no place was it more than one hundred feet. "Deas' Point" and the dueling ground were slightly in excess of that width. Some places were not fifty feet wide.

At last we merged upon a place where the bank and hill swelled out crescent-shaped into the river. It was about two hundred and fifty feet long, and one hundred and twenty-five feet wide. It was level and partially wooded, especially by the tangle of undergrowth which existed everywhere in that wild and lonely place. I could then appreciate why Burr and Van Ness, his second, were clearing the plateau to accommodate the duelers, when Hamilton's boat arrived at 7 o'clock A.M. from New York.

The level top of this grassy plateau is about eight or ten feet above the level of the river (rated at high or low tide, as the case might be). The river bank is hard and goes abruptly down into the water which, anywhere along, is about deep enough for a small boat to float and land its passengers.

When we emerged on this plateau, our guide said “There it is!” and sure enough, there it was and no mistake about it. Every stone and tree on the plateau was covered with rude cuttings of all sorts and sizes; some indicated considerable patience and perseverance. In connection with some initials we could see “Boston”, “Philadelphia,” “New Orleans,” “Albany,” etc. Some of the cuttings on the trees had nearly closed up by the recuperative power of vegetable nature. Most of the dates indicated that the visits had been made during the first decade of this century, at least during the ten years immediately succeeding the tragedy. We examined everything minutely. After doing this we sat on a boulder to speculate. Many stones, larger and smaller, lay around. Some of the largest would about make a good load for a one-horse cart. We could see that several had been rolled over the plumb bank into the river. One of these has been carried up to the top of the cliff and now lies securely near its brink on the grounds of the mansion lately owned by Mrs. King, and which was designated a year or two ago for a public park. This stone is covered with rude cuttings and is a fair sample of those which formerly lay all around over the dueling ground. Many of the trees were partially stripped of their bark and were in process of dying.

Perhaps we were sitting on the very boulders where Hamilton or Burr, or Pendleton or Van Ness, or Dr. Hosack had rested on that fatal morning about 51 years before—perhaps from the very place where we sat. We could put the top of our canes upon the very spot where Hamilton lay gasping when he said to Dr. Hosack, “This wound is mortal.” Perhaps the boats had landed here, there or yonder, as the irregularities of the bank seemed to indicate a possible or easy landing place. After our surmises were exhausted we began to think about marking the spot or place so that we could be sure about finding it at any future time. In default of tools, cutting to any extent was out of the question. It was a good thing, everything considered, that we had nothing along with us to cut with; if we had we might have made our rude record among a hundred others. As it was, we planned a better and more permanent record. We “builded better than we knew.”

MARKING THE PLACE

From where we sat, a few yards north of the north end of the standing ground of the duelists, we could look straight along the south house line of Forty-second street, New York, as far up as Fifth avenue. Going 200 feet south we found that the north house line of Forty-first street, New York, extending to this plateau, was only a few yards south of the standing ground of the duelists. The true ground was therefore the plateau between the extended two lines named above, the river bank was clearly defined and permanent, the foot of the cliff the same. In case improvements would come and break up the river margin, the trap rock hill would still remain and was not likely to be disturbed very seriously. The true standing ground of the duelists is therefore to be found about sixty feet east of the clearly defined foot of the cliff.

There was, at this time, no trace whatever of the St. Andrew's Society's monument. An old tree of cedar, about seven inches in diameter, and fifteen feet high, was at this time growing at the northern boundary line of the standing ground. The tree was considerably cut, barked and disfigured, but it seemed to be sending up vigorous shoots and looked like a pretty permanent fixture.

In visiting this place in 1885 I found a rude wagon road close to the foot of the hill and a single line of railroad track, which the Erie Railroad Company had laid from the oil dock at Weehawken to the abattoir and cattle-yards at Guttenberg. Even then the dueling ground had not been disturbed seriously. The old cedar tree had been denuded of its branches, but was still strong and vigorous.

PRESENT CONDITIONS OF THE GROUND

I visited the ground on Wednesday, the 17th of this month (May, 1893) and found no very material changes. The old cedar tree is about gone. The remains of it is a barked, blackened stump about three feet high, it has been cut off with a saw, it has axe marks near the ground, as though some vandal wanted to cut it down and carry it off. Several railroad spikes are driven into the top, these have acted as wedges and have split the old stump into several sections, they are firmly held by the spring of the old trunk, being driven in level with the heads, they cannot be removed without special tools.

Instead of one line of railroad track, I found three, the additional lines had been laid by the West Shore Railroad Company. They are a part of the new Junction Railroad which was intended to connect the West Shore main road from its terminus at the Weehawken W.R.R. ferry with the Continental lines which had their terminus in Hoboken and Jersey City. Exactly opposite the duelling ground, the talus of the cliff has been cut somewhat, not seriously, however. The wagon road is gone. Between the slight cutting and the using of the wagon road, the three railroad tracks lie snugly together, as they sweep around the slight swell outward of the hill opposite the dueling plateau. The latter has not been disturbed; the true standing ground of the duelists lies close to the outside or easterly track. In making the railroad, boulders and other debris found in the way were rattled over the edge of the bank into the river; this has broadened the plateau several feet, at a point a few yards north of the true ground; at present that is the broadest point. Formerly the plateau was broadest at the true standing ground, however, the alteration is so slight as to be immaterial in altering the original form of the ground.

At present the historical plateau is covered with an undergrowth of alanthus which abounds in the neighborhood, and seeds and grows in every crevice and patch of fresh soil. This growth has, at present, attained about the altitude and size of bean poles, there are two exceptions to this, two of the growths might be called trees. One, the larger of the two, stands perhaps 100 feet north from the northerly boundary of the true standing ground, it is on the horizontal section, 15 inches in diameter one way, and 12 inches the other way, it is about 15 feet high. Its mate stands on a line with the northerly boundary line, spoken of above, a little nearer to the river brink, than the true standing ground. The old cedar stump is three or four yards due west from this young alanthus tree. At present the old stump must be looked for as it is nearly hidden by the vile alanthus undergrowth. This bunch of wild, ragged vegetation is, at present, the only thing of the kind existing outside of the railroad tracks and between them and the river. In looking north up the track from under the “Devil’s Pulpit” this scraggy growth hanging out into the river, beyond the line of the railroad tracks, is a noticeable and prominent feature, and at present, it is one way, to a substantial identification of the dueling plateau. However, it may not be permanent, and the extended lines of Forty-first and Forty-second streets from New York is therefore a more reliable manner of identification.

THE “DEVIL’S PULPIT”

The “Devil’s Pulpit,” so called, is the most prominent feature in this picturesque and bold landscape. Coming down the west side of the Hudson River the Palisade ridge follows the west bank closely with nearly a uniform height, about 150 feet. When the ridge reaches a point opposite the Delaware and Hudson Canal Company’s canal docks it stops abruptly and ends in a precipice over 150 feet high. The trap rock formations at this place are much broken by joints and fissures. It overhands the railroad tracks which pass close under it. Occasionally large masses fall upon the railroad tracks. It always looks threatening and dangerous, less so lately on account of the large masses which have already fallen. An examination would seem to show that the ridge had turned and run across to the east into the river bed at a sharp angle, and that later some powerful agency had removed it entirely and left the ragged butt now seen where the break had taken place. The dueling plateau is about a quarter of a mile due north up the track from the “Devil’s Pulpit.” The three tracks have barely room enough to pass between the river and this rugged cliff. About 200 feet up from the southerly corner of this cliff, the flat strip at the bottom of the hill begins to broaden, maintaining its average of about 100 feet until the dueling plateau is reached. At that point it broadens a little more, perhaps thirty feet. The face of the hill north of “Devil’s Pulpit” is not precipitous. It has a good slop, and is heavily wooded. By taking care a man might climb to the top among the trees, rocks and large and loose boulders. A little above the Pulpit, at the base of the hill, is a spring of water where there is a rude excavation, which by compliment is called a well. Sometimes it runs off quite a stream of clear water.

Standing on the dueling plateau and looking north, the mammoth elevator of the North Hudson County Railroad Company and elevated tracks from the elevator to the hill top loom up against the northern sky. The dueling plateau is about midway between the “Devil’s Pulpit” and this elevator.

HOW TO REACH THE DUELLING GROUND

To reach this historical ground a party can take the trolley line of street cars from either of the Hoboken ferries to Union Hill. After passing the village of Weehawken, at and around Nineteenth street, going up, a wagon road goes to the right with an easy divergence. It crosses the ravine stream, the “Awiehaken” of the Indians, and leads to the coal docks right opposite the “Devil’s Pulpit,” above described, a walk of a quarter of a mile up the tracks leads to the famous dueling ground, which cannot be mistaken after reading the above minute and detailed description.

The coal docks of the Delaware and Hudson Canal Company are the nearest encroaching improvement. Something else is evidently intended, as in the river a good many piles were driven, which stand above the water away out and opposite to the dueling plateau.

CONCLUSION

I have now done what little I could to avert an entire loss of the identity of this historic place. Perhaps no one will appreciate my action or concern about it. I cannot admit that I am at all solicitous, whether they do so or not; they can suit themselves about that. I am, however, firm in the conviction that it is a public duty, when the opportunity offers, to try to preserve a knowledge and identity of such an interesting and historical place, which may, at some future time, be sought out as a patriotic shrine by Republicans from all parts of the civilized world, who may feel inspired to do honor to the name and fame of the great man, who had the prescience during the formulation period of the nation’s growth, to induct and incorporate into its constitution that spirit of coherence and vital energy which sustained it intact throughout three wars, one of them the greatest which has ever transpired in this world, since civilization began to cement and build up commonwealths, which could be strong, self-sustaining and at the same time free.

The place where Alexander Hamilton, the greatest constructive statesman of America, perhaps the greatest of any county or time, met his death, in the prime of his vigorous manhood, at the hands of a political schemer and demagogue, who deliberately planned and executed that crime which has branded his name with eternal infamy, will ever and always be an interesting spot to all who honor and appreciate the highest order of patriotism and intelligence statesmanship.

NOTES

In the records of that period, as far as available, the following interesting matter may be found. Winfield's History of Hudson County is particularly rich and full in the gathering together of data relating to the all these affairs.

HAMILTON AND BURR'S ANTE-DUEL CORRESPONDENCE

It appears that only New York had its full quota of mischievous tattlers. After the election for Governor of New York in 1804, when Burr was so signally beaten, while his exasperation was still keen and fresh, Dr. Charles D. Cooper began to tattle around and carry stories from one party to another; he was one of the small, miserable busybodies of politics. He reported around his haunts that he "could detail a still more despicable opinion which General Hamilton had expressed of Mr. Burr." This silly remark was the cause of the controversy which culminated in the death of Hamilton.

As soon as Colonel Burr heard of this gossip, he availed himself of the opportunity to make it the pretext for an open rupture with General Hamilton. He wrote a letter to the latter in which he demanded "a prompt and unqualified acknowledgement or denial of the use of any expression which would warrant the assertion of Dr. Cooper." William P. Van Ness, who was afterwards Burr's second at the duel, was the latter's messenger. He delivered Col. Burr's letter. Hamilton, in a courteous tone, on June 20, said "that it would be unreasonable to hold him responsible for any sayings or inferences of Dr. Cooper." On the next day, June 21, Burr rejoined in the following language:

"Sir—Your letter of the 20th instant has been this day received. Having considered it attentively, I regret to find in it nothing of that sincerity and delicacy which you profess to value."

"Political opposition can never absolve gentlemen from the necessity of a rigid adherence to the laws of honor and the rules of decorum. I neither claim such privilege or indulge in it to others."

"The common sense of mankind affixes to epithet adopted by Dr. Cooper the idea of dishonor. It has been publicly applied to me under the sanction of your name. The question is not whether he has understood the meaning of the word, or has used it according to syntax and with grammatical accuracy, but whether you authorized this application, either directly or by uttering expressions or opinions derogatory to my honor. The time 'when' is in your own knowledge, but no way material to me, as the calumny has now been disclosed so as to become the subject of my notice, and as the effect, is present and palpable."

"Your letter has furnished me with new reasons for requiring a definite reply."

When Mr. Van Ness delivered this letter Hamilton told him that he “considered it rude and offensive, and unless it was recalled the only answer which it was possible for him to make was that Mr. Burr might take such steps as he might think proper.” Nevertheless he replied in writing as follows:

“Sir—Your first letter, in a style peremptory, made a demand in my opinion unprecedented and unwarrantable. My answer, pointing out the embarrassment, gave you an opportunity to take a less exceptionable course. You have not chosen to do it; but your last letter, received this day, containing expressions indecorous and improper. You have increased the difficulties to explanation intrinsically incident to the nature of your application. If by a ‘definite reply’ you mean the direct avowal or disavowal required in your first letter I have no other answer to give than that which has already been given. If you mean anything different, admitting of greater latitude, it is requisite you should explain.”

Colonel Burr did not consider Hamilton’s explanations satisfactory. The actual duel came off on July 11, 1804, with the results given in the account in the paper to which this is a note.

OTHER DUELS ON THE HISTORICAL DUELLING GROUND

Dueling must be considered one of the relics of barbarism. It was held in the middle ages to be one of the “ordeals” and has been termed as “judicial combat.” A people with high standards could never admit that it was a satisfactory way of settling disputes. France seems to have been the great home of the duello. It is said that during the reign of Henry IV, 4,000 Frenchmen lost their lives by this method of settling their disputes. During the fifty years included in and succeeding our American Revolution, it appears to have been acclimated in the United States. The first three decades of this century appears to be the time when it was most in vogue among our people. After that it was frowned upon by public opinion and began to dwindle. That may be truly said in relation to the northern states; in the south it was largely in use until the time of and after our late great war, dueling and slavery went out together.

It has been said that in his Don Quixote, Cervantes so burlesqued chivalry that it was laughed out of Europe. After public sentiment became so pronounced that the seconds in a duel at Weehawken load the pistols with corks instead of leaden bullets, it was about time for dueling to go; it had become too ridiculous to be longer tolerated or encouraged in any intelligent community.

While it was the habit around New York all the duels were fought at Weehawken. I know of only one exception, that between Price and Wilson, which took place on Bedloe’s Island about the year 1820. Many noted duels were fought at other places in the United States. Bladensburg, near the City of Washington, was a noted dueling ground.

We read of duels here and there being fought by General Lee and John Laurens, by Gwinette, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, and General McIntosh, by Commodore Decatur and Barrow; both Gwinette and Decatur were killed. General Jackson in a duel killed a man name Dickinson. Jackson fought several other duels. Henry Clay and John Randolph fought in 1826. Jonathan Cilley and William J. Graves, both Members of Congress, fought in 1838. Cilley was killed. Colonel Benton fought several duels, and killed a man name Lucas. General Cadwaldder and General Conway had a duel, fought to vindicate Washington from aspersions.

In relation to the duels fought at Weehawken, Mr. Winfield's book is the great authority, and implies wonderful industry and research on his part. The facts, as there presented, clothed in the rich robes of Mr. Winfield's inimitable style, reads like a romance adorned with the choicest flavors of rhetoric. The chapter on the duels at Weehawken is the best in his book, which in many other respects is exceedingly valuable.

I will enumerate, in a very brief way, the duels which history records as being fought at the historical dueling ground at Weehawken.

On September 2, 1799, Aaron Burr and John B. Church, Hamilton's brother-in-law, fought; no wounds; Burr's coat pierced. Church apologized in such a manner that the dueling ended without anything more serious than a torn coat.

On November 22, 1801 Captain George Eaker of Palatine, Mohawk Valley, N.Y., and a young blood of New York theatrical circles, named Price, fought with several firings and no words. It was given up, Price declaring that "Eacker was such a d—d lath of a fellow that he might shoot all day to no purpose."

On November 23, 1801, Philip Hamilton, General Hamilton's eldest son, and Captain Eacker fought a duel which ended Hamilton's life.

The last two duels, as above, related to a dispute about some rudeness before ladies in a theatre, which Captain Eacker concluded was an insult to him. All the parties were about twenty years of age and exceedingly "fresh."

On December 25, 1801, John Langstaff and Oliver Waldron, jr., exchanged shots without damage. The dispute was amicably settled.

On the same day Augustus Smith and Archibald M. Cock, who were seconds in the Langstaff-Waldron duel, disputed about the ground. To settle it they had a shot at each other. Cock was wounded in the face.

On July 2, 1802, the most noted duel of all, except that of Hamilton and Burr, took place. It had a certain relation to the two latter distinguished men. The celebrated DeWitt Clinton and John Swartwout were the principals. Clinton was a warm friend of Hamilton and Swartwout of Burr. Swartwout was a brother to Samuel Swartwout, who was afterwards President Jackson's Collector of the Port of New York. Five rounds were exchanged, every round Clinton protesting that he had no malice and did not want to fire at Swartwout. The latter was stubborn and inexorable and would accept no explanation or apology; he insisted on the firing being continued; he had been twice wounded and was bleeding profusely; his seconds and physician finally forced him from the field against his protests. He recovered.

On November 21, 1803, Richard Riker and Robert Swartwout, brother to John, principal in the In the last duel, fought; the quarrel grew out of the last duel. Riker was a friend to Clinton and Swartwout to Burr. Riker was wounded in the right leg. Both were indicted by the New Grand Jury for dueling.

On July 11, 1804, the celebrated duel between Hamilton and Burr took place.

On July 8, 1815, the next duel took place. The result between Hamilton and Burr had stamped infamy upon the practice, hence the long interval. Isaac Gouverneur and William H. Maxwell were the first to revive the practice, on the date named above. Gouverneur was badly wounded and died on July 10, 1815. This duel was fought alongside Hamilton's monument, which was then standing, it was not removed until about 1820. The certain and exact date of its removal is not known.

On May 12, 1816, Benjamin Price, a Rhinebeck grocer, and Major Green, of the British arm fought. Price was killed. The principals had met at a theatre and were in adjoining boxes. Price had several ladies along. Major Green looked straight in the face of one of them once or twice. She complained to Price, he at once rose up, went over to Major Green and with his finger and thumb twisted the Major's nose. This was the cause of the duel. After Price was killed Green fled to Europe. Several years afterwards Price's brother met Green in New York. He took up his brother's quarrel, a duel was fought at Bedloe's Island, when Green was killed. This story, as detailed in Mr. Winfield's book, is one of the most interesting in it.

One October 16, 1818, Oliver H. Perry, the hero of Lake Erie, and John Heath fought. Neither was wounded. Commodore Decatur was Perry's second.

On November 28, 1827, William G. Graham, an editor, and Dr. Barton of Philadelphia fought. Graham was killed at the second fire. He only lived a few minutes. This duel produced an immense sensation. Dr. Pennel's certificate of Graham's death was considered unique in its line. He wrote:

"I hereby certify that William Graham, aged 34, died on the 38th inst., of vulness."

On Monday, October 19, 1835, Henry Aitken and Thomas Sherman met to settle a quarrel about a girl. As they were about to launch their deadly compliments at each other, Andrew Boyd, a Hudson county constable, arrested them. Squire Paradise of Jersey City sent both of them to Hackensack Jail to await the action of the Grand Jury.

On May 16, 1837, a Spaniard from Guatemala and a Frenchman residing in New York fought. The Spaniard was wounded. The names are not given.

About the next duel the data is very indistinct. One of the parties was named Bird. It is recorded that when he was shot he jumped straight up about six feet into the air and immediately fell over dead.

On September 28, 1845, the last duel was fought at Weehawken. The names are not given, but it was at this duel that corks were used instead of lead. The matter of dueling became so ridiculous that it was hooted and laughed out of existence, at least as far as New York and the Middle and New England States were concerned. I am of the opinion that Mr. Winfield has perhaps inadvertently, made a slight mistake in relation to the size and situation of the dueling plot. He says: "Under these heights, about twenty feet above the water, on a grassy shelf about six feet wide and eleven paces long, reached by an almost inaccessible flight of steps, was the dark and bloody ground. The old cedar which sheltered the plateau where Hamilton fought was there until about four years ago." That would be about 1870, as Mr. Winfield's book bears on its copyright imprinted 1874.

Mr. Winfield must be mistaken about the size of the duel plot and the height from the water; also about the "almost inaccessible flight of steps." In 1855, I found the plot much as it is today, hardly any changes. Its size is, I should guess, is about the size of a lot and a half (city plots 25x100 feet). It bulged out into the river crescent shaped with the convex side to the river. It is not quite ten feet above the water. At that time and since, I saw the cedar tree spoken of. Another remark relative to the Hamilton-Burr duel shows the improbability of Mr. Winfield's description of the plot. It says: "The pistols were then loaded in each other's presence and the principals placed, Hamilton looking over the river toward the city, and Burr toward the heights under which they stood." The river and the Palisades and the flat strip under the Palisades all run parallel, and, substantially, north and south. The line of fire, as above, would, therefore, be substantially, east and west. "Eleven paces" would be 33 feet. This kind of a place, "six feet wide" from north to south, and thirty-three feet from east to west, did not at any time exist as a plateau. The topography of the ground, both then and now, forbids such a conception to be entertained. When I saw it in 1855 it had not been disturbed in any respect, which was in any way material. The dueling plot (standing place) was upon the present plateau, of considerable length and width, and not upon any shelf projecting thirty-three feet out of the face of this very steep hill.

J.R.

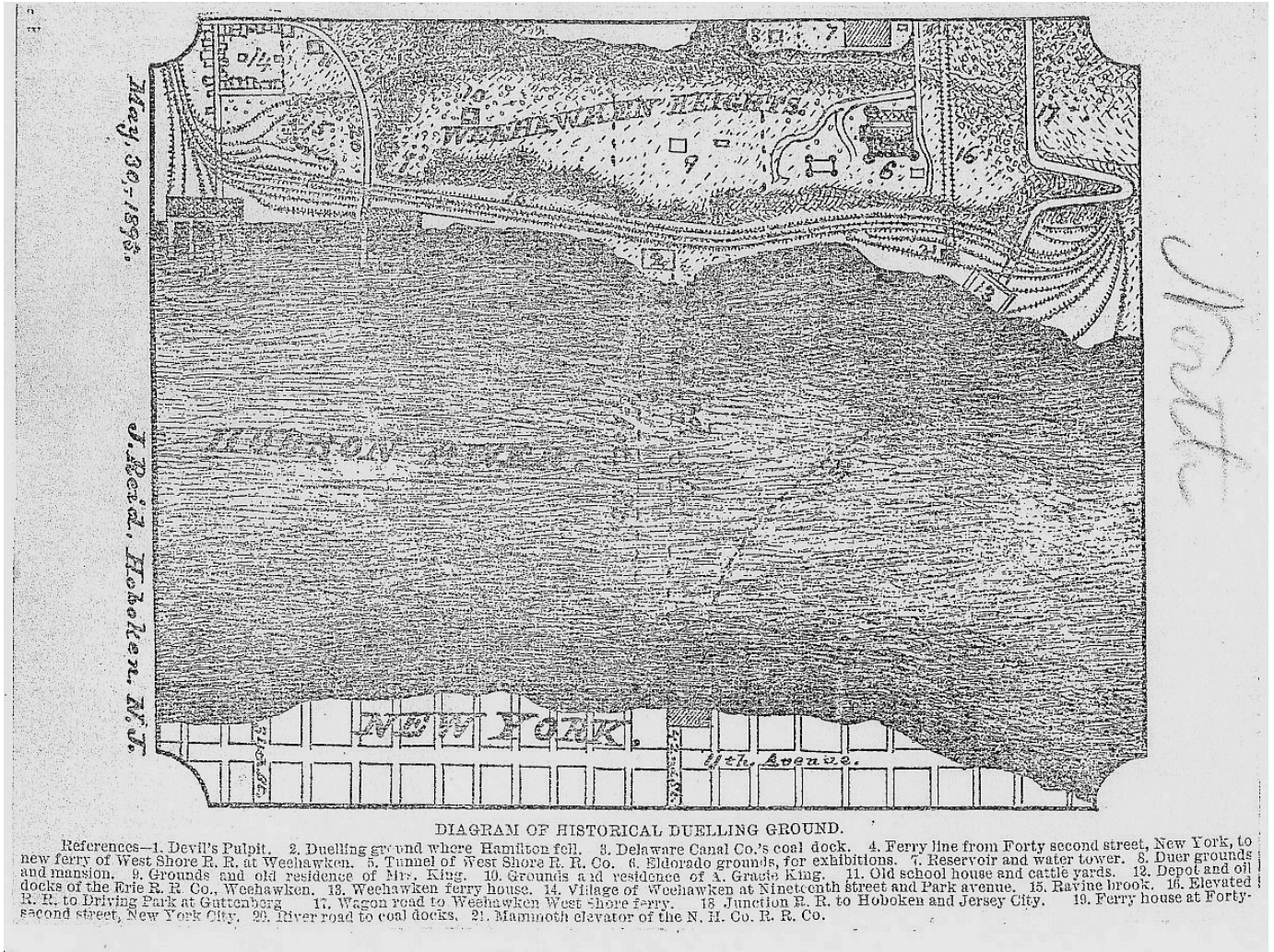


Diagram of the Duelling Ground Referred to in this Article