

FATAL WORDS

In the early 1830s, the Nullification Crisis was heating up. Vice president and South Carolinian John C. Calhoun believed that the states had a right to ignore (or nullify) any laws the state deemed to be unconstitutional, namely recent tariff laws that affected trade in South Carolina.

Lawyer Benjamin Franklin Perry began his foray into politics in 1832, when he was at the helm of the Unionist newspaper the *Greenville Mountaineer* at the height of the nullification process—to the great ire of other South Carolina politicians, especially Calhoun. Calhoun’s acolytes, namely Greenvillian legislator Waddy Thompson (a vehement supporter of Calhoun’s), had duped Turner Bynum, a handsome, young, ambitious man from Columbia, to come to Greenville and start a rival paper, the *Sentinel*. Bynum published an attack on Perry, comparing him to the serpent that “wooded Eve to commit sin by a tempting lie.” With Perry’s honor called into question, he had no choice but to do what any southern gentleman would do at the time: challenge Bynum to a duel. The trap had been set. Hothead Perry had already been in at least a dozen physical fights over his political beliefs, nearly coming to blows with Thompson on more than one occasion. The nullifiers were confident Perry would be destroyed, either by cowardice of not following through or ending up dead—either way, they would be rid of him and his influential editorials. Bynum was known as an excellent shot. Perry wrote in his diary that Bynum and the *Sentinel* were brought to Greenville by Thompson, who “made a tool of Bynum to destroy me.”

Like the arena deaths of antiquity, dueling was, as described by Random House, “a prearranged combat between two persons, fought with deadly weapons, according to an accepted code of procedure” and was seen as a sanctioned way of handling disagreements. Dueling was a southern pastime and was reported in the newspapers like baseball stats. As described in the *People’s Journal* of Pickens, the rules “of the code of duello always possess a charm, the more especially if the parties to it are prominent and results tragic.”

Perry confided in his diary that Thompson and the nullifiers had “made unreal attempts to black my reputation and take my life.” He waxed poetic that “life is not of much consequence to me, but the grief and distress it will cause my parents that any misfortune befall me.” He even penned a statement “to the people of Greenville,” in which he stated that he was indebted to them for letting him be a public servant and that if he is killed by the editor of the *Sentinel* that “they” have accomplished their goal in getting rid of him.

WICKED GREENVILLE



Above: Island at Hatton's Ford on Tugaloo River, near where the Perry/Bynum duel took place.
Photograph by John Stoy.



Left: The grave of Turner Bynum at the Old Stone Church Cemetery.
Photograph by John Stoy.

WICKED GREENVILLE

He called out Waddy Thompson for being the “behind the curtain, principle [*sic*] actor in the tragedy. He brought Bynum to this place.”

At sunrise on the morning of August 16, 1832, Perry and Bynum met on an island at Hatton’s Ford, near the Tugaloo River. Afterward, Perry noted that Bynum “looked unusually pale.” After the customary fifteen paces, Bynum fired instantly, grazing Perry. Perry’s bullet hit Bynum in the stomach and took off the tip of his finger. Perry wore a coat with a red lining, which the surgeon mistook for blood, and he tore the coat open to reveal that Perry was unharmed. Perry rushed to Bynum and spoke to him, saying, “I hope, sir, you are not mortally hurt,” to which Bynum replied, “I would hate to die of so trifling a wound; I hope to live to renew the fight.”

Bynum died a few hours later and was buried by friends outside the graveyard wall of Old Stone Church in Pendleton in the middle of the night in the pouring rain. He was twenty-eight. Apparently, one could not be killed in a duel and buried in a churchyard. Neighborhood lore, retold many times over, stated that there were two trees marking Bynum’s grave that were referred to as the “dueling trees.” The trees eventually died, and the graveyard expanded, enclosing the grave within it.

Perry wrote in his diary, “Bynum was buried on Saturday night, and my feelings are bad.” He thanked God for his mercy and recounted, “On my return from the place, I met Bynum’s brother. We shook hands and had a long talk. He told me that there was nothing of ill will in his feeling towards me.”

Perry feared Thompson and the nullifiers would continue their vendetta and stated in the *Mountaineer* that his dueling days with rival editors were finished. He wrote that if he chose to duel again, it “shall be a man of distinction. I am done with lackeys.” The *Sentinel* lasted six months before shuttering its doors for the last time, as Union sentiment in Greenville was at an all-time high. Malinda McBee, the daughter of “father of Greenville” Vardry McBee, was so besotted with Bynum that she never married and even “covenanted never again to look at herself in a mirror.” She lived until 1890, when she died at the age of eighty-two. Perry eventually became the seventy-second governor of South Carolina, and in his later years, he acknowledged that the duel was a very “painful event” and one of the “dark spots” of his life.

Another southern gentleman who brought himself some trouble over honor was William Lowndes Yancey. Yancey had also been the editor of the *Greenville Mountaineer* and was very vocal about his anti-Calhoun stance. In fact, you could say it was his mouth that got him into this trouble. He was overheard making a disparaging political remark at a debate that featured congressional candidates Waddy Thompson and Joseph Witner.

WICKED GREENVILLE



*Above: Mansion House.
Courtesy of the Greenville
County Library.*



*Left: William Lowndes
Yancey. Courtesy of the
Greenville County Library.*

WICKED GREENVILLE

He called Thompson a scoundrel and was confronted by seventeen-year-old Elias Earle. Earle was Thompson's nephew and a cousin of Yancey's wife, Sarah Earle Yancey. Yancey slapped the young Earle to "chastise his insolence"; Earle called him a "damned liar" and hit him with a riding crop. The altercation was broken up, and Yancey met with Earle's father, Dr. Robinson Earle, the next day to try to explain the events that had taken place, but neither Earle was satisfied. On September 8, 1838, Yancey and Dr. Earle had a confrontation on Main Street in front of the Mansion House (near the present-day Westin Poinsett Hotel). Earle again called Yancey "a damned liar," to which Yancey responded in turn by drawing his pistol and shooting the sixty-two-year-old Earle. Yancey proceeded to beat him with the butt of his gun in broad daylight. He also drew a sword and attempted to stab the dying doctor but was pulled away from the fight.

Yancey was taken to the jail in Greenville and wrote to his brother that he had secured "a legacy" for his son, as people would know better than to besmirch a Yancey. Dueling aficionado Benjamin Perry acted as one of Yancey's lawyers. The jury decided Yancey was guilty of manslaughter. He was sentenced to serve a year in jail and pay a fine of \$1,500, but his sentence was commuted by Governor Patrick Noble. Yancey went on to have a political career.

Perhaps there was something in the water at the offices of the *Greenville Mountaineer*, because in 1845, Dexter Wells, an office boy and nephew of then-editor O.H. Wells, shot Robert Headden in cold blood. One newspaper account reported that Wells had been lying in wait with a two-year-old grudge against Headden, even though they hadn't spoken in years. "Seduction and Murder" was the headline of another newspaper account, which proclaimed that Headden had seduced Well's sister, writing that it "comes as near justifiable homicide as any murder can." Headden remained in agony for over twenty-four hours before succumbing to his wounds. Wells must have been light in the political connections, because he was given a "necktie sociable" and hanged.

SPIRITS, LAUDANUM AND AN AXE

The people of Greenville were tickled when Chang and Eng Bunker visited the city in 1834. The "Siamese twins" enthralled audiences with their sideshow entertainment. The *Charleston Courier*, on December 15, 1834,