

The Events Leading Down to the Tragedy

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DOCUMENT ONE

Being the First Draft of a Paper to be Read before the Tuscarora Township Historical Society by Mr. Hardeign Spoynte, B.A.

Madame President, members, guests:

It is with unabashed pride that I stand before you this evening. You will recall from your perusal of our Society's Bulletin (Vol. XLII, No. 3, Fall, 1955, pp. 7-8) [pp. correct? check before making fair copy. HS] that I had undertaken a research into the origins of that event so fraught with consequences to the development of our township, the Wat-ling-Fraskell duel. I virtually promised that the cause of the fatal strife would be revealed by, so to speak, the spotlight of science [metaphor here suff. graceful? perh. "magic" better? HS]. I am here to carry out that promise.

Major Wading did [tell a lie] prevaricate. Colonel Fraskell rightly reproached him with mendacity. Perhaps from this day the breach between Watlingist and Fraskellite may

begin to heal, the former honestly acknowledging themselves in error and the latter magnanimous in victory.

My report reflects great credit on a certain modest resident of historic oldNorthumberlandCountywho, to my regret, is evidently away on a well-earned vacation from his arduous labors [perh. cliché? No. Fine phrase. Stett HS]. Who he is you will learn in good time.

I shall begin with a survey of known facts relating to the Watling-Fraskell duel, and as we are all aware, there is for such a quest no starting point better than the monumental work of our late learned county historian, Dr. Donge. Donge states (Old Times on the Oquanantic, 2nd ed., 1873, pp. 771-2): "No less to be deplored than the routing of the West Brance Canal to bypass Eleusis was the duel in which perished miserably Major Elisha Watling and Colonel Hiram Fraskell, those two venerable pioneers of the Oquanantic Valley. Though in no way to be compared with the barbarous blood feuds of the benighted Southern States of our Union, there has persisted to our own day a certain division of loyalty among residents of Tuscarora Township and particularly the borough of Eleusis. Do we not see elm-shaded Northumberland Street adorned by two gracefully pillared bank buildings, one the stronghold of the Fraskellite and the other of the Watlingist? Is not the debating society of Eleusis Academy sundered annually by the proposition, "Resolved: that Major Elisha Watling (on alternate years, Colonel Hiram Fraskell) was no gentleman"? And did not the Watlingist propensities of the Eleusis Colonial Dames and the Fraskellite inclination of the Eleusis Daughters of the American Revolution 'clash' in September, 1869, at the storied Last Joint Lawn Fete during which eclairs and (some say) tea cups were hurled?" [Dear old Donge! Prose equal Dr. Johnson!]

If I may venture to follow those stately periods with my own faltering style, it is of course known to us all that the controversy has scarcely diminished to the present time. Eleu-mAcademy, famed alma mater (i.e., "foster mother") of the immortal Hovington 1 is, alas, no more. It expired in flames on the tragic night of

August 17, 1901, while the Watlingist

*vide Spoynte, H.: "Egney Hovington, Nineteenth-Century American Nature Poet, and his career at Eleusis Academy, October 4—October 28, 1881" (art.) in Bull of the Tuscarora Township Hut. Soc., VoL XVI, No. 4, Winter, 1929, pp. 4-18.

members of that Eleusis Hose Company Number One which was stabled in Northumberland Street battled for possession of the fire hydrant which might have saved the venerable pile against the members of the predominantly Fraskellite Eleusis Hose Company Number One which was then stabled in Oquanantic Street. (The confusion of the nomenclature is only a part of the duel's bitter heritage.) Nevertheless, though the Academy and its Debating Society be gone, the youth of Eleusis still carries on the fray in a more modern fashion which rises each November to a truly disastrous climax during "Football Pep Week" when the "Colonels" of Central High School meet in sometimes gory combat with the "Majors" of North Side High. I am privately informed by our borough's Supervising Principal, George Croud, Ph.B., that last November's bill for replacement of broken window panes in both school buildings amounted to \$231.47, exclusive of state sales tax; and that the two school nurses are already "stockpiling" gauze, liniment, disinfectants and splints in anticipation of the seemingly inevitable autumnal crop of abrasions, lacerations and fractures, [mem. Must ask Croud whether willing be publ. quoted or "informed source." HS] And the adults of Eleusis no less assiduously prosecute the controversy by choice of merchants, the granting of credit, and social exclusiveness.

The need for a determination of the rights and wrongs in the affaire Fraskell-Watling is, clearly, no less urgent now than it has ever been.

Dr. Donge, by incredible, indeed almost impossible, labor has proved that the issue was one of veracity. Colonel Fraskell intimated to Joseph Cooper, following a meeting of the Society of the Cincinnati, that Major Watling had been, in the words of Cooper's letter of July 18, 1789, to his brother Puntell in Philadelphia, "drauin [drawing] the long Bow."2

O fatal indiscretion! For Puntell Cooper delayed not a week to "relay" the intelligence to Major Watling by post, as a newsy appendix to his order for cordwood from the major's lot!

The brief, fatally terminated correspondence between the major and the colonel then began; I suppose most of us have it [better change to "at least key passages of corresp." HS] committed to memory.

* DONGE, Dr. J.: supra, p. 774, u.

The first letter offers a tantalizing glimpse. Watling writes to Fraskell, inter alia: "I said I seen it at the Meetin the Nigh before Milkin Time by my Hoss Barn and I seen it are you a Atheist Colonel?" It has long been agreed that the masterly conjectural emendation of this passage proposed by Miss Stolp in her epoch-making paper³ is the correct one, i.e.: "I said at the meeting [of the Society of the Cincinnati] that I saw it the night before [the meeting] at milking time, by my horse barn; and I [maintain in the face of your expressions of disbelief that I] saw it. Are you an atheist, colonel?"

There thus appears to have been at the outset of the correspondence a clear-cut issite: did or did not Major Watling see "it"? The reference to atheism suggests that "it" may have been some apparition deemed supernatural by the major, but we know absolutely nothing more of what "it" may have been.

Alas, but the correspondents at once lost sight of the "point." The legendary Watling Temper and the formidable Fraskell Pride made it certain that one would sooner or later question the gentility of the other as they wrangled by post. The fact is that both did so simultaneously, on August 20, in letters that crossed. Once this stone was hurled [say "these stones"? HS] there was in those days no turning back. The circumstance that both parties were simultaneously offended and offending perplexed their seconds, and ultimately the choice of weapons had to be referred to a third party mutually agreeable to the duelists, Judge E. Z. C. Mosh.

Woe that he chose the deadly Pennsylvania Rifle!* Woe that the two old soldiers knew that dread arm as the husbandman his sickle! At six o'clock on the morning of September 1, 1789, the major and the colonel expired on the cward behind Brashear's Creek, each shot through the heart. The long division of our beloved borough into Fraskellite and Watlingist had begun.

After this preamble, I come now to the modern part of my tale. It begins in 1954, with the purchase of the Haddam

- STOLP, A. DeW.: "Some Textual Problems Relating to the Corre-

- poodence between Major Elisha Watling and Colonel Hiram Fraskell, Eleusis, Pennsylvania, July 27-September 1, 1789" (art.) in Bull, of

- » Tuscarora Township Hist. Soc., Vol. IV, No. 1, Spring, 1917.

« Amusingly known to hoi polloi and some who should know better as fee "Kentucky" Rifle.

property by our respected fellow-townsmen, that adoptive son of Eleusis, Dr. Caspar Mord. I much regret that Dr. Mord is apparently on an extended vacation [where can the man be? HS]; since he is not available [confound it! HS] to grant permission, I must necessarily "skirt" certain topics, with a plea that to do otherwise might involve a violation of confidence. [Positively, there are times when one wishes that one were not a gentleman! HS]

I am quite aware that there was an element in our town which once chose to deprecate Dr. Mord, to question his degree, to inquire suspiciously into matters which are indubitably his own business and no one else's, such as his source of income. This element of which I speak came perilously close to sullyng the hospitable name of Eleusis by calling on Dr. Mord in a delegation afire with the ridiculous rumor that the doctor had been "hounded out of Peoria in 1929 for vivisection."

Dr. Mord, far from reacting with justified wrath, chose the way of the true scientist. He showed this delegation through his laboratory to demonstrate that his activities were innocent, and it departed singing his praises, so to speak. They were particularly enthusiastic about two "phases" of his work which he demonstrated: some sort of "waking anaesthesia" gas, and a mechanical device for the induction of the hypnotic state.

I myself called on Dr. Mord as soon as he had settled down, in my capacity as President of the Eleusis Committee for the Preservation of Local Historical Buildings and Sites. I explained to the good doctor that in the parlor of the Had-dam house had been formed in 1861 the Oquanantic Zouaves, that famed regiment of daredevils who with zeal and dash guarded the Boston (Massachusetts) Customs House through the four sanguinary years of conflict. I expressed the hope that the intricate fretsaw work, the stained glass, the elegant mansard roof and the soaring central tower would remain mute witnesses to the martial glory of Eleusis, and not fall victim to the "remodeling" craze.

Dr. Mord, with his characteristic smile (its first effect is unsettling, I confess, but when one later learns of the kindly intentions behind it, one grows accustomed to his face) replied somewhat irrelevantly by asking whether I had any dependents. He proceeded to a rather searching inquiry, explaining that as a man of science he liked to be sure of his

facts. I advised him that I understood, diffidently mentioning that I was no stranger to scientific rigor, my own grandfather having published a massive Evidences for the Phlogiston Theory of Heat.* Somehow the interview concluded with Dr. Mord asking: "Mr. Spoynte, what do you consider your greatest contribution to human knowledge and welfare, and do you suppose that you will ever surpass that contribution?"

I replied after consideration that no doubt my "high water mark" was my discovery of the 1777 Order Book of the Wyalusing Militia Company in the basement of the Spodder Memorial Library, where it had been lost to sight for thirty-eight years after being hisfiled under "Indian Religions (Local)." To the second part of his question I could only answer that it was given to few men twice to perform so momentous a service to scholarship.

On this odd note we parted; it occurred to me as I wended my way home that I had not succeeded in eliciting from the doctor a reply as to his intentions of preserving intact die Haddam house! But he "struck" me as an innately conservative person, and I had little real fear of the remodeler's ruthless hammer and saw.

This impression was reinforced during the subsequent month, for the doctor intimated that he would be pleased to have me call on him Thursday evenings for a chat over the coffee cups.

These chats were the customary conversations of two teamed men of the world, skimming lightly over knowledge's whole domain. Once, for example, Dr. Mord amusingly theorized that one of the most difficult things in the world for a private person to do was to find a completely useless human being. The bad men were in prison or hiding, he explained, and when one investigated the others it always turned out Aat they had some redeeming quality or usefulness to somebody. "Almost always," he amended with a laugh. At other Hoes he would question me deeply about my life and activist*, now and then muttering: "I must be sure; I must be

- Generally considered the last word on the subject though, as I

- demand it, somewhat eclipsed at present by the flashy and mysti-oi "molecular theory" of the notorious Tory sympathizer and rene-

- Jd*Benjamin Thompson, styled "Count" Rumford. "A fool can

- N*»)* find a bigger fool to admire him." [Quote in orig. French? Check source and exact text HS]

sure"—typical of his scientist's passion for precision. Yet again, he would speak of the glorious Age of

Pericles, saying fervently: "Spoynthe, I would give anything, do anything, to look upon ancient Athens in its flower!"

Now, I claim no genius inspired my rejoinder. I was merely "the right man in the right place." I replied: "Dr. Mord, your wish to visit ancient Athens could be no more fervent than mine to visit Major Waiting's horse barn at milking time the evening of July 17, 1789."

I must, at this point, [confound it! I am sure Dr. M. would give permission to elaborate if he were only here! HS] drop an impenetrable veil of secrecy over certain episodes, for reasons which I have already stated.

I am, however, in a position to state with absolute authority that there was NO apparition at Major Watling's horse barn at milking time the evening of—

[Steady on, Hardeign. Think. Think. Major W. turned. I looked about No apparitions, spooks, goblins. Just Major W. and myself. He looked at me and made a curious sort of face. No. Nonono. Can't be. Oh, my God! / was the—Fault all mine. Duel, feud. Traitor to dear Eleusis. Feel sick. . . . HS]

DOCUMENT TWO

Being a note delivered by Mrs. Irving McGuinness, Domestic, to Miss Agnes DeW. Stolp, President, the Tuscarora Township Historical Society

"The Elms"

Wednesday Dear Miss Stolp,

Pray forgive my failure to attend the last meeting of the Society to read my paper. I was writing the last words when—I can tell you no more. Young Dr. Scantt has been in constant attendance at my bedside, and my temperature has not fallen below 99.8 degrees in the past 48 hours. I have been, I am, a sick and suffering man. I abjectly hope that you and everybody in Eleusis will bear this in mind if certain facts should come to your attention.

I cannot close without a warning against that rascal, "Dr." Caspar Mord. A pledge prevents me from entering into de-

tails, but I urge you, should he dare to rear his head in Eleusis again, to hound him out of town as he was hounded out of Peoria in 1929. Verbum sapientibus satifc.

Hardeign Spoynte