Politics and Duels

Politics in Petersburg and the Broad River Valley played an important part in the development of the state's political parties. In Georgia's convention in 1788 to adopt the Federal Constitution the decision was unanimous; however this action did not mean that Georgia belonged to the Federalist Party, which came into power in the national government. Soon Federalist centralizing forces created much discontent in Georgia, with the result that the Federalist Party in the state never developed much strength.

Thomas Jefferson's philosophy of government appealed to Georgians, and his party was dominant in Georgia for many years. The state never cast its electoral vote for a Federalist. Hezekiah Niles, the Baltimore editor, said that Georgia politics was like the handle on a pitcher—all on one side, but this did not mean that there was an era of good feeling in state politics, for there soon grew bitter factionalism which Niles again commented on, saying that he did not understand what the parties in Georgia were fighting about but that they did bitterly fight.

It was only an expression of human nature to be contentious, especially in any group of people as large as a state, where there must be a contest for the offices based on personalities if not on principles. In Georgia one of the earliest issues which was at the roots of a factionalism leading to the development of two parties was the sale of the state's western lands in 1795—known in history as the Yazoo Fraud. Land was the most evident thing to get possession of and trade on, therefore, land speculation became the order of the day. But when Georgia sold her birthright of western lands for a mess of pottage, there arose a great uproar throughout the state. All who had had a part in this sale along with their supporters were tarred with the brush of "Yazooists."
The opponents of this sale dubbed the Yazooists also as Federalists, a charge which had little relationship to any Federalist principles.

Here was the chance to build up a party based on this strong emotionalism which had spread over the state. James Jackson of Revolutionary fame, now a Senator in Congress, resigned his position and returned to Georgia to fight the Yazoo Fraud sale, and having got elected to the legislature, he was in the forefront in repealing the law selling this land. From now on to his death in 1806 he capitalized on the Yazoo Fraud and built a strong political party on that issue. Being from Savannah, he needed a leader to bring the upstate area into his political setup, and there was no more likely person for this position than William H. Crawford, who lived near Lexington in the Upper Broad River Valley. Soon there fell into this Jackson-Crawford party such Petersburgers as William W. Bibb and Charles Tait. Bibb, though a physician, was in politics as early as 1803, when he was one of six Petersburgers running for the Georgia House of Representatives. His election brought forth this comment from John W. Walker, who would, himself, later be in the midst of politics, "He will perhaps do as much honor to the County as any member we have sent for many years."  

This combination of the coast and the upcountry made a hard-and-fast political party, whose coastal branch after Jackson's death was led by George M. Troup, another Savannahian, who had been a protege of Jackson's. Crawford, soon gravitating to Washington to become a national leader, did not fail to keep a strong hand on Georgia political leaders. Jackson had been born in England; Troup was born in that part of Georgia's western country which later became the state of Alabama. However, the leadership of the upcountry element in the party was almost entirely Virginians among the Broad River Valley settlers.

The Jackson-Crawford Party, which later became known as the Troup Party, of course, had to have an opposition party. Here came the group which had been called the Yazooists and Federalists—the land speculators. The head of this group was the Clarke family, old Elijah and his son John, and Elijah, Jr., to some extent. Clarke, being a North Carolinian, carried with him most of that group, many of whom had come to Georgia before the Revolution and also had settled in the Broad River Valley and had become dominant in Lincoln and Wilkes counties in the southern part of the Valley. Leaders in this group were such Broad River
Valley men, in addition to the Clarkes, as John M. Dooly of Lincoln County and Peter Lawrence Van Allen of Wilkes, formerly of the State of New York. Also known for his Federalism was Shaler Hillyer of Petersburg, formerly of Connecticut, who was a merchant and a planter rather than a politician, of whom it was said that he was "notoriously known to be a bigoted Federalist, and one who is in no way friendly to the principles or conduct of the [Jefferson] Administration." Hillyer was, indeed, a true Federalist, but in little or no way related to the Clark Party, as it came to be called. (Elijah spelled his family name Clarke; his son John, for whom the party was named, dropped the e.)

The Clarkites were strongest in the upcountry and especially on the frontiers. The sharp cleavage between the Virginians and the North Carolinians in politics, and even in other walks of life, was well expressed by the ardent Virginian George R. Gilmer in commenting on Dooly: "Though identified with Wilkes county [really a resident of Lincoln County] as Judge Dooly was, my friends had little or no intercourse with him. The habits and opinions of the old Georgia settlers from North Carolina were so different from those of the Virginians who followed them, to whom I belonged, that there was scarcely any intercourse between them."

Petersburg, its environs, and the rest of the Broad River Valley were long outstanding in providing leadership in both state and national politics and in both political factions. But especially prominent was this little kingdom in its representation in the National Capital. From 1800 on for the next quarter century with Benjamin Taliaferro leading off in the House of Representatives there followed David Meriwether, William W. Bibb, William Barnett, Wilson Lumpkin, Joel Abbott, Thomas W. Cobb, George R. Gilmer, and Wiley Thompson—all in the House of Representatives. This list is especially impressive when it is noted that at this time in Georgia Representatives were elected on a general state-wide ticket, with no candidates allotted to any part of the state. Beginning in 1807 in the Senate, there was William H. Crawford until 1813, when he resigned to go to France as the United States minister and later to become Secretary of War for a short time before his appointment as Secretary of the Treasury. Finally he was an unsuccessful candidate for the Presidency in 1824.

While in the Senate, Crawford had as his colleague Charles Tait of the Petersburg neighborhood, who had entered in 1809
and remained until 1819. It was unusual in any state for the two Senators to come from such a restricted region as the Broad River Valley, but in 1813 Bibb resigned from the House of Representatives to become a United States Senator and a colleague of Tait's until he resigned this position in 1816—thus here for three years there was the unheard of situation when both Senators came from the same neighborhood—Petersburg. Never before or afterwards was there such a converging of political leadership into such a small area, in Georgia or elsewhere. The combination of Crawford, Bibb, and Tait was yet to make itself felt as a dominant force in the rise of the State of Alabama.

Scientists know something about how weather conditions bring on hurricanes and cyclones, but probably less is known of conditions in the realm of the mind which create hurricanes of mental aberrations resulting in duels. Certainly having a high sense of what was considered honor and a quick response in the protection of it, and by taking undue umbrage at words and acts which could be construed into insults, led men to fight duels. The only good that it might seem could come from this custom was to make men more careful of their language toward their fellows; but political contests created heat spirals in the mind just as air-currents did in nature which led to hurricanes in both realms and to the destruction of life alike.

The year 1802 produced a rash of duels and challenges, though some of the challenges did not result in duels. David Brydie Mitchell, later governor of Georgia, fought and killed William Hunter in Savannah. Although the exact cause of the duel is obscure, it is easy to surmise that it was one of those birth pains in the rise of the two Georgia parties, for Mitchell was an ardent Jeffersonian and Hunter was a Federalist. Another duel which was fought in Burke County, about twenty-four miles from Louisville, then the state capital, grew directly out of the Yazoo sales. Robert Watkins, one of the compilers of the Digest of the Laws of Georgia, 1755-1799, in which the Yazoo law was included, and James Jackson, the fervid opponent of the law and the author of the Rescinding Law, fought it out, with Jackson wounded but not badly.

But the hotbed of political turmoil was in the Broad River Valley, with Petersburg and its vicinity providing the fields of honor and some of the Petersburgers using their influence to ward off duels in the making. In all the personal quarrels leading to challenges and to duels themselves, political factionalism was
the main cause. A minor affair led to a chain reaction in which four challenges passed resulting in one duel and a death.

The beginnings developed in a trial in the Wilkes County Superior Court on May 11, 1802. George Cook was being tried on the charges of some petty misappropriation of funds, with Charles Tait prosecuting him, and Peter Lawrence Van Allen (also spelled Van Alen, Van Alan, and Vanallen), then the Solicitor General of the Western Circuit, defending Cook. Tait and Van Allen were neighbors in the vicinity of Petersburg. While Tait had been Rector of Richmond Academy, in Augusta, Cook had been one of his students; later when Tait had been moody and despondent he had written little notes of a personal nature to Cook, who had kept them. Now in preparation for the trial, Cook had shown them to Van Allen, who with devastating sarcasm and wit read them before the court.7

Tait became so mortified over this impropriety and show of disrespect that he challenged Van Allen to a duel. The political undertone of all this was well shown when Tait selected William H. Crawford to deliver the challenge and in effect act as his second. Crawford first made the affair public by writing to the Augusta Chronicle two days after the insult (May 13) which was not published until the 29th, giving the news of the challenge. Crawford charged Van Allen with making “improper expressions” in the Cook trial and that Tait had called on Van Allen “for that satisfaction on which is due to the injured feelings of a man of honor.” When Crawford delivered the challenge, Van Allen said that he would answer it in his own time as he thought proper. But that very evening Van Allen went to a friend in town (Washington, Wilkes County) to borrow a case of pistols and ammunition, remarking that he had received a challenge. The next morning Crawford met Van Allen in the company of John M. Dooly and asked for a definite answer. Dooly then handed Crawford an unsealed letter directed to Tait, which he refused to receive since it was addressed to Tait. When Dooly informed him that the letter was unsealed, Crawford read it and found that Van Allen “absolutely refused to make reparation for the injury he had done.” A little later in the day Crawford asked Dooly if he was Van Allen's second. Dooly denied that he was. Crawford added that he was giving all of this information to the public that they might judge of the motives which restrained Van Allen “from making that reparation, which, if a Gentleman, he was bound to render.”8

This letter gave only a bare outline of the developments. In a
letter to the *Augusta Chronicle*, dated June 2, Van Allen gave his side of the argument. Van Allen said that after he had received Tait's challenge, he "applied to John M. Dooly, Esq. to be my second, to which he readily assented," and he asked Dooly for his opinion whether "I ought to meet him [Tait]," and the next morning Dooly "gave it as his decided opinion, that from Mr. Tait's standing I ought not to meet him as a gentleman." Van Allen said that he then wrote his reply to Tait's challenge, dated May 12, and unsealed, which Dooly had handed to Crawford. In this letter Van Allen said, "I think it a duty I owe the community and my own feelings, to tell you that I consider you not in any-wise on a footing with a gentleman. But I will assure you whenever you shall have wiped off that infamy, I shall give you a different answer. . . . I know the value of character and honor; but in the meantime, I should deem it at present improper, in addition to the above reasons, to notice you, because the person whom you have so basely injured intends to chastise you for your perfidy towards him [Cook?], of which circumstance I am apprised, and perhaps attending to your call might deprive him of that justice which he so justly claims."

Van Allen having thus published his answer to Tait's challenge, devoted the rest of his communication in the *Augusta Chronicle* to an attack on Crawford and to direct attention to Tait, calling him "an apostate preacher and politician" and charging him with cowardice; for after that first day in court Tait had not been back nor had he been seen on the streets of Washington. With bitter sarcasm Van Allen said, "I was informed that he had taken a room in col. Willis's loft during his stay in town [Willis being the keeper of the town hotel]." And as for Crawford, if there was anything in this communication which he disliked, "I am ready and willing to give him any satisfaction he may require."9

Crawford had started this newspaper publicity, Van Allen had kept the ball rolling, and now Dooly gave it a kick. In a letter written the day before Van Allen's but published at the same time, Dooly gave his version of the affair. He said that Van Allen had asked him to associate himself with other gentlemen and give their opinion of whether or not Van Allen was accountable to Tait. Some of the gentlemen refused to give an opinion, but without Dooly saying so here he must have told Van Allen as Van Allen said that he did not consider Tait a gentleman. When this same unsealed letter was seen by Tait, he read it and refused to accept it since it should have been directed to Tait's second (an
extreme punctiliosity that seemed to indicate that Tait was trying to squirm out of fighting the duel which his challenge had brought up). It began to look ludicrous because Crawford had at first objected to reading the letter because it was addressed to Tait, and now Tait was refusing to accept it because it was not addressed to Crawford. Later in the day, Crawford saw Van Allen and asked for his answer. Van Allen replied that he had no further answer to make. Later the same day Crawford met Dooly on the streets and seemed determined to involve Dooly in the quarrel by asking him if he considered himself Van Allen’s friend and “from the great stress laid upon the word friend, and the manner in which it was expressed,” seemed to want to know if Dooly approved Van Allen’s conduct. Dooly said, “I replied I did not feel responsible for any of capt. Van Allen’s conduct. . . . But from the language adopted by Mr. Crawford on this occasion, it would seem that he wished me to be in a situation that would attach accountability from me to him. If so, I can assure the gentleman, that the answer I made him was not produced from any desire to avoid his resentment, and that if he wishes to attach responsibility to my situation, or to make a personal difference of the affair between him and myself, he is at liberty to consider me the friend or second of Mr. Van Alen.”

It was now Tait’s turn to fire a salvo; but he waited a little more than three weeks to do so. On June 24 he wrote Van Allen, beginning, “I shall not attempt to vie with you in the low arts of scurrility and abuse. I have too much respect for propriety, for the delicacy of the public ear, and for my own dignity, to call you an insidious rascal, a corrupt villain, or a dastardly calumniator, but perhaps I may, with all imaginable ease, prove you such. I shall not tell you how much you are condemned by all honest men, nor in what a delicate point of view you stand with the community in general, but perhaps of this you may be soon sensible, unless a sense of shame, that last hope of expiring virtue, may be entirely extinguished.”

Tait denied the charge that he had ever been a preacher, “much less an apostate Preacher, in any religious society whatever,” and he had never changed his politics or political principles. “My opinions of men may have changed,” he cryptically added, “but my political principles remain unchanged.” He insisted that his conduct toward Cook was correct: “I never doubted one moment of the fairness and propriety of my conduct toward this man.” And the reason Tait did not appear in court on the last day was that
Van Allen had let out the news of the challenge, and "for that reason, and that alone, by the advice of my friends, I did not go out on that day; nor did I change my room, as you have meanly suggested." "Having thus attended to your base attempt to injure me," continued Tait, "and your mean subterfuge to hid your cowardice, I now inform you, that it was not on account of your private character, or general conduct, that I thought you entitled to my notice, for any insult you could give me. It was because you have, by accident, become the Solicitor-General (the office you have disgraced) and because, from a combination of circumstances, I though it proper to teach others, through you, that I was not to be injured with impunity." He then accused Van Allen of "corruption in office," citing two affidavits, and now "perhaps take my leave of you forever." And with this parting shot he closed his letter: "You have made your retreat into the Temple of Cowardice; it shall be to you an inviolable sanctuary."

Van Allen was not to retreat into that "Temple of Cowardice." Finding the peace-loving Dooly as good as his word in not wanting to get mixed up in this fury of words or on the Field of Honor, Van Allen was forced to look for another friend or second. He found William B. Tankersly, and in a letter to Tait on July 9, Van Allen disproved Tait's charges of corruption in office. On the same day he gave instructions to Tankersly to arrange for a duel with Tait. "In your visit to Mr. Tait, you will have the goodness to consider your mission as circumscribed within the limits of my note; no equivocal or inky negotiation can be admitted at this crisis; to the point then—The adjustment of the precise time, place, arms, and mode of warfare constitute the objects of your mission, from which I have the fullest confidence you will not suffer yourself to be drawn either by artifice or cowardice—If he wants time give it to him." Tankersly went immediately that evening to Tait's home and delivered the challenge, but Tait declined to give a definite answer as to the time, place, or weapons, which in effect amounted to a refusal to fight. In challenging Tait a second time Van Allen accused Tait of being "disposed to shrink behind an inky curtain of falsehood, malevolence and detraction... and least [sic] some false alarm should again drive you to the garret, I shall immediately repair beyond the jurisdictional limits of the state." He stated that he with one friend would go down to Petersburg and cross over the Savannah River to Vienna. "The weapons and mode of warfare shall be of your own choosing—If you are a man of honor or spirit, prove it."
Van Allen with his "one friend" (not Tankersly, it seems) spent the night at Cook's residence, about a mile from Tait's, and the next morning set out early and reached Vienna between 8 and 9 o'clock. There they waited all day until 6 p.m. for Tait to come or to send word, but he did neither. Van Allen had tried in the negotiations (one-sided it seemed) to make it easy and convenient for Tait to fight "on either side of the river, or even in his own yard if he wished it." Van Allen ended up his account of his futile attempt to fight Tait by saying that when he had first refused to fight Tait it was not because of fear but because of Tait's despicable character as established in the court trial, for his "acting in a subordinate capacity, and his being under the influence of those who it is well known make use of you as a tool." Van Allen ended by saying, "Your character has been omitted in this publication for the want of room."12

While Tait was avoiding Van Allen, as it seems, or at least not making it easy for Van Allen to find him, he was soon to be relieved of any further annoyance from that quarter, for William H. Crawford now entered the fray. Van Allen had given Crawford ample opportunity, if not invitation, to send him a challenge; but Crawford had refrained, which fact led Van Allen to assume that Crawford would not fight. While the Van Allen-Tait affair was still brewing, Van Allen on seeing Crawford in the Willis Hotel, in Washington, insulted him and challenged him to a duel. Years later, when Crawford was actively in the race for the presidency of the United States, a Georgia supporter observed that Crawford had no quarrel with Van Allen, and Crawford "never gave him any cause of offense. In sending the challenge, Vanallen became a tool of a political party opposed to Mr. Crawford."13

On August 7, 1802 this item appeared in the Augusta Chronicle:
"DIED. Last Monday [July 31], at the house of Col. Thomas Murray, in Lincoln county, PETER L. VAN ALEN, Esq. of a wound he received in fighting a duel with William H. Crawford, Esq. on Saturday last, in South-Carolina."14 The duel took place a few miles below Petersburg, near old Fort Charlotte. Crawford had borrowed a pair of old pistols, which snapped twice while he was trying them out. In later life Crawford always looked on the affair stoically, speaking of it as casually as of any ordinary event in his life. He said that his first shot missed Van Allen, who had made an ugly face at him but on his second shot he pulled his hat brim down from viewing Van Allen's face.15 Van Allen
had the use only of his right eye, having lost his left one “in a
drunken brawl” (according to a hostile critic), which loss did not
inconvenience him in the duel. Van Allen had come to Georgia
from Kinderhook, New York, the home town of Martin Van
Buren. This fact led to erroneous assumptions that he was a rela-
tive of Van Buren; but it seems that this relationship did exist—
a brother of Van Allen’s had married a cousin of Van Buren’s. Van
Allen left a wife and a small daughter and an estate valued
at $4,814. Among his possessions were books valued at $200, five
horses and colts, a yoke of oxen, and eleven slaves.

Before the tussle between Tait and Van Allen had terminated
in the death of the latter, Tait had decided to follow up the part
Dooly had played in the early stages of the Tait-Van Allen affair.
Van Allen had informed Tait on June 2 that Dooly “gave it as
his decided opinion, that from Mr. Tait’s standing I ought not
to meet him as a gentleman.” As has already appeared, Dooly did
not want to become involved in duelling in any relationship and
soon found it possible to dissociate himself from being Van
Allen’s second, if, indeed, he had ever thought himself so. Dooly
already becoming noted as a wit, according to a tradition had a
little argument with Freeman Walker, a well-known lawyer. When
it seemed that they might come to blows, several bystanders seized
Dooly but only one caught hold of Walker, whereupon Dooly
remarked, “Gentlemen, one of you will be sufficient to prevent
me from doing mischief; the rest of you had better hold Major
Walker.”

Tait now wanted to know whether Van Allen had correctly
reported Dooly’s opinion. Dooly had written a long letter in
which he was quite equivocal, and Tait was not satisfied with it.
And so on July 26, Tait asked Dooly if he had said that he was not
“on the footing of a gentleman.” Dooly replied the next day that
Tait already knew his opinion and that Tait’s demand “will
never extract it from me.” Dooly rather bellicosely added, “But,
sir, I can inform you that no call you can make will effect your
object.” The latter expression was cryptical, but it seemed to mean
that Tait would be unable to maneuver him into a duel. Events
were moving fast; on the same day Tait repeated his request for a
plain statement: “As your answer seems predicated on the prin-
ciple that I am already acquainted with the truth or falsehood
of Mr. Van Alen’s statement and as this is not the case, I trust
you will be more explicit on this subject.”

On July 28 Tait, who was at Lincoln Courthouse (Lincolnton),
wrote Dooly this note: “I shall leave this place within an hour for Elbert, I expect your answer to my note of yesterday.” Dooly sent a verbal reply that he had no other answer than what he had already given, and it is evident that he expected the matter to end there. The melancholy news then came two days later that Crawford had killed Van Allen in their duel. This must have been a blow to Dooly and could not have whetted an appetite for a duel in which he was to play a principal part. But Tait was not so affected; he was determined to have satisfaction. On August 4, waiting no longer for word from Dooly, Tait sent him a challenge: “I am reduced to the necessity of calling on you for that satisfaction due to a man of honor.” Dr. Bibb, acting as Tait’s second, delivered this note to Dooly. Two days later, Dooly, being in Petersburg, wrote Tait that he had called too late for an explanation: “Had you called on me before the challenge and acceptance, or before the death [referring to the Crawford-Van Allen duel], I should have made no difficulty in giving you a written or verbal explanation.” But even so, Dooly told Tait that he would advise with Dooly’s friends who knew his opinion “on the propriety of now giving it to you.” With his spirits now somewhat mended, Dooly curtly added: “If, in the mean time, this should not be satisfactory, you are at liberty to take satisfaction whenever you please; I shall not avoid your company.”21 This expression looked more like an invitation to a fist-scuffle rather than to a duel. One of the witticisms attributed to Dooly was that when a judge threatened to whip him he remarked that there would be no honor in it, “as anybody could do it.”22

More than three weeks passed without Tait hearing from Dooly, and if neither had tried to avoid the other, at least they had not met on the streets of Petersburg, Lincoln Courthouse, Elbert Courthouse, or on a country road, where Dooly, undoubtedly, would have favored getting whipped in a scuffle rather than killed in a duel. Also Dooly aided by his friends had been busied in seeking appointment to the Solicitor-Generalship of the Western Circuit left vacant by the death of Van Allen. But finally on September 1 Dooly wrote Tait that he had given up consulting with his friends and would have told Tait so “but for the conceived impropriety in an affair of honor, while in nomination for an appointment from the Executive [Governor Josiah Tattnall, Jr.].” Dooly had written this letter from Petersburg, and it would be hard to assume that he had not been conferring with Dr. Bibb, who disliked very much to see people fight duels al-
though he was acting as Tait's friend. But here was something unheard of in the annals of the code duello: a person acting as the friend and second of both principals in a duel. On being asked by Tait to carry his challenge to Dooly, Dr. Bibb with sorrow agreed, mentioning his "high regard for Mr. Dooly, regretting the issue to which the affair was likely to come, and soliciting the privilege of settling it amicably if it could be done." Tait had agreed to this if it was done "compatible with his honor." On the same day of Dooly's answer to Tait (September 1) Dr. Bibb held a conference with Dooly and they agreed on the arrangements for the duel; but without a doubt Dr. Bibb was determined that the duel should never be fought, for he was planning to compromise the trouble.

Tait and Dooly were to go to Barksdale's Ferry, a few miles below Petersburg, and each attended by one friend, they should cross over the Savannah River into South Carolina there to agree where the duel was to be fought. The time was to be September 3, two days after Dooly's note to Tait. At the time agreed upon, Dooly and Tait with his friend Dr. Bibb appeared, but Dooly came alone—no doubt all arranged by Dr. Bibb as part of his compromise measures. In later reporting the affair Dr. Bibb said, "I enquired for his friend, he said he had none, but was perfectly willing that the business should be conducted by me, and mentioned that since making the arrangements, he had informed some of his friends that he had received a challenge, but that they expressed such dissatisfaction to the practice of duelling, as to induce him to avoid a direct application for fear of an arrest."

Now for the duel! When they appeared on the Field of Honor, Dr. Bibb made these propositions to Tait and Dooly: In answer to Dooly's contention that Tait had applied too late for what Dooly's opinion of Tait was, Tait would say that he would have called sooner had he not thought that Crawford would do so and that Tait did make the call as soon after the Crawford-Van Allen duel "as his indisposition would permit." Then Dr. Bibb turning to Dooly: "Whereupon you will say that you never gave the opinion stated by Mr. Van Allen [a statement at variance with the record]. This was agreed to, and the parties shook hands on terms of mutual friendship." This statement was signed by W. W. Bibb and J. M. Dooly, but strangely enough not by Tait. Reporting on the whole affair, Dr. Bibb said that Dooly extended his hand, which Tait "cordially accepted." If the duel had actually been fought and Dooly had needed surgical attention, at Dooly's
request Dr. Bibb had agreed to act in that capacity. Dr. Bibb said
that he had “acted under the influence of extreme solicitude alone
for the welfare of the two gentlemen.” Since Tait was the ag-
gressor, it can easily be inferred that Dr. Bibb may not have in-
formed him of all the “back-stage” arrangements that were being
made until they were on the Field of Honor.

This affair became famous in the legal lore of the state for many
years thereafter, including an element which was entirely absent
in the negotiations relative to the challenge and the settlement—
it was Tait’s wooden leg. Had it not been for Dooly’s reputation
as a wit and his aversion to fighting, the wooden-leg embellish-
ments would never have been added to the affair and it would
have been entirely forgotten. Through some accident in earlier
life Tait had suffered a crushed leg and had had to have it am-
putated. Thereafter he had worn a wooden leg. According to the
traditional lore (and there were several versions), when Tait ap-
peared on the battlefield and asked Dooly where his friend was,
Dooly replied that he was out in the woods looking for a hollow
log into which Dooly intended to place his leg so that he would
be on an equal footing with Tait. In the passing of notes result-
ing in the challenge, according to tradition, Dooly had insisted
that he would fight only on condition that Tait agree for Dooly
to appear with one leg in a hollow log or bee gum. Tait took
this proposition as an insult and threatened to publish him as
a coward, to which Dooly replied that Tait might do so “in every
gazette in the State, for he would rather fill a dozen newspapers
than one coffin!”

Political party maneuverings and assassinations were as much
back of these challenges and duels as were wounded honors. Duels
were convenient ways to get rid of political opponents and party
leaders. The Clarkites were behind the Van Allen-Dooly group;
and, of course, Tait had Crawford’s support. Bibb was not a duel-
list and, as has appeared, he intervened wherever possible to pre-
vent duels; however, he was a part of the Crawford political fac-
tion.

The cause which brought these two leaders into a clash was not
long delayed. A vacancy had occurred in the judgeship of the
Western Circuit in 1803, and Governor John Milledge had ap-
pointed John Griffin to serve until the legislature should meet to
elect a judge, at which time Griffin became a candidate for the
permanent position. Griffin and John Clark were brothers-in-law,
since both had married daughters of Micajah Williamson. Natur-
ally John Clark worked hard for Griffin’s election. Charles Tait
was the candidate of the Crawford faction, and Crawford worked
equally hard for Tait’s election. Crawford asserted that Clark had
ridden the circuit with his brother-in-law Griffin and had urged
his election, having written to various county grand juries to
recommend Griffin’s election. Clark stoutly denied these charges,
but Crawford was successful in securing the election of Tait. The
harsh language Clark and Crawford had been using against each
other was intensified after Tait’s election; and now Clark charged
that Crawford had been boosted in his law practice by favors
Judge Tait had bestowed on him.

The result was a challenge which Crawford sent to Clark on
December 6, 1804. Clark accepted, and their seconds immediately
began to make the necessary arrangements for the duel. Captain
Howell Cobb, Clark’s second, set the time for the ensuing Janu-
ary and the place “at Fort Charlotte, about one mile below Peters-
burg, on the South Carolina side of Savannah river.” Colonel
Thomas Flournoy, Crawford’s second, agreed to the time set,
though he observed that it was a little long after the challenge had
been accepted. But he added, “This however is not so objection-
able as the place, as it is known to General Clark, that at or near
the place fixed on, Mr. Crawford lately met Peter L. Van Allen,
Esq. deceased.” This reference to the Van Allen affair was a clever
way of unnerving Clark and bringing to his attention the dangers
he would be undergoing in meeting Crawford. Clark caught the
point: “I had no doubt, for the purpose of reminding me of the
hazard to which I was about to expose myself, as Mr. Van Allen,
one of the Solicitors General of Georgia, had, at no very great
distance from that spot, in a similar meeting been killed.”

Here was the prospect of the state losing the services and leader-
ship of Clark or Crawford or possibly both of them—a tragedy
which a number of gentlemen felt would be a calamity. They ap-
pealed to Governor Milledge to appoint a Court of Honor to
bring about a settlement of the dispute. Both men agreed to this
plan, and the Governor was glad to comply. A court of five men
was appointed, who declared that it was their “opinion that both
gentlemen are brave and intrepid, and so decree and award that
they acquit each other of any imputation to the contrary, and that
they relinquish their animosity, and take each other by the hand
as friends and fellow citizens.”

Clark was not well pleased with the decision, for he felt that it
was too favorable to Crawford. It was not long before these two
“Kilkenny cats” were at it again. Judge Tait was dragged into the affray by Clark, who charged that the Judge had conspired against him. Clark now called on the legislature to impeach and remove Judge Tait. Crawford played a decisive part in the legislature in decisively defeating the move. Failing in this attempt for vindication, Clark now on December 2, 1806 resorted to challenging Crawford to a duel. The time and the place were set—December 16, “at the High Shoals on the Apalachee on the Indian Territory.” The arrangements were worked out in a series of twelve articles; however, a dispute arose over two of them, and that young Petersburger, Dr. Bibb ever ready to compromise duelling difficulties and save lives by truce as well as by his medical skill, was called in to arbitrate the meaning of the two points. He was to be assisted by a Dr. Abbott and a third of their choosing, if needed. With some hesitation Clark agreed but remarked that it was certain that Bibb was “entirely devoted to Mr. Crawford, and under his control.” The duel took place with Crawford receiving a graze on his left wrist. He pronounced himself satisfied and refused to continue the fight; and when some months later Clark tried to push Crawford into continuing the duel “to a final issue,” Crawford declined.27

The conscience of Georgia was rising up against duelling. There were many like Dr. Bibb who were hoping that a stop could be put to this brutal custom of settling personal quarrels and promoting political parties by killing one another. In 1800 the editor of the *Augusta Chronicle* lamented the fact that the civilized world adopted a method of settling disputes, “which violates the commands of God, and sits [sic] at naught the laws of man: And it seems somewhat singular that the crime of wilful murder should be almost universally punished with death, and that the deliberate determination to take away the life of a fellow mortal, carried into effect through the formal ceremony of a duel, should be passed over in silence, or at least winked at by tribunals of justice.”28

The unfortunate death of Van Allen called forth from “Inimicus Supertitionis” a powerful blast against duelling. “Every instance of a victim to the present fashionable practice of duelling,” he said, “is calculated to torture the feelings of humanity, and to cause the cool and contemplative mind to startle at the thought. One would suppose that a practice, taking its rise at a time when the deadly shade of superstition overshadowed the world, would have been long since scouted from a nation pre-
In 1809 Georgia passed a law, declaring that anyone “in any way concerned” in a duel “or accessory thereto,” upon conviction should be incapable “of holding any office of honor, trust or profit within this State.”

But so deeply embedded with some people was the custom that for more than a half century thereafter a few duels were being fought.

Although Petersburgers were not promoters of duels they were thoroughly embued with a fighting spirit on proper occasions when the honor of their country was impugned or its dignity insulted. In 1807 when the British warship Leopard treacherously attacked the Chesapeake, the Petersburgers were ready to march at a moment’s notice. In an emotional meeting presided over by old Revolutionary Benjamin Taliaferro, they became excited enough for war against Great Britain. In commenting on this outburst of patriotism the editor of the Augusta Chronicle said, “They feel as if they had been at the advanced posts.”

And when only an embargo resulted there were outcries in Petersburg against such pusillanimous measures, which did nothing more than stagnate business and trade.

Shaler Hillyer wrote to Oliver Whyte, his friend and former associate in Boston: “I do not think that anything has happened since the days of '74 that excited so much unusual indignation as this unprecedented attack—the People are ripe for war. They begin to see and feel that national imbecility serves only to invite attack—and Produce National Degredation.” He thought that Congress would have to meet soon in extra session, and added, “The Grave of our National honor is already prepared. We stand upon its brink ready to sink to the bottom or rise resplendent.”

Petersburgers, he said, stood for the most energetic measures. It was doubly easy for Shaler to be indignant at Jeffersonian attempts to ignore insults to his country, for the Shaler family, back in Connecticut, were strong Federalists and had been almost disconsolate over Jefferson’s election.

The embargoes and other ineffective measures adopted by the Jeffersonian Democrats finally led President James Madison in June, 1812 to recommend war against Great Britain. Before the end of July, there arrived in Augusta “a detachment of fine looking recruits, under the orders of Capt. [William H.] Jones, of Petersburg,” who along with other recruits would soon be on their way to Savannah to defend the seacoast against any attack by the enemy.

Shaler Hillyer put an end to his politics at the water’s edge. Paa-
triotism meant everything to him in time of war; politics, nothing. Although he was a New Englander, born and bred, he was greatly disappointed in the soft attitude the Northeast was taking toward the war—actually trading with the enemy and refusing to provide troops. Again he wrote Oliver Whyte in Boston in the summer of 1813: “Do tell me Oliver what your Bostonians mean—Are you Determined on a Division of the Union? Do you mean to bring about a separation of the states. I wish you to Let me know what you think of those things. You know how we are situated in this country & if we are Divided I think it more than Probable that I Shall find it my interest to move Northwardly provided the thing is Done peacably but of this there is no great Danger and I can assure you that I feel more from a Division among ourselves than from Europe combined. You know that I am an enemy to any sett of men who for a moment contemplate a Division. You also know that the Federal Party of your state is composed of a sett of men for whom I have for years contracted a Decided Partiality, but if their object is disunion I must Discard them forever. Let their exertions to federalize the union be confined within the poles of the constitution and they will have my hearty concurrence but if they step one foot beyond that Sacred Boundary, they certainly forfeit my confidence & meet the execration of all Good men.” As patriotic as Hillyer was, he still hoped for peace—the war was ruining his business. When the war was little more than a year old he wrote to his New York suppliers, asking “is there any hopes of a General Peace—or a peace with England?”