Pistols on the Bayou

WHEN THEIR HOST greeted them dressed in black from head to toe, the house guests of John Ward Gurley thought it an excellent joke.

Despite his funereal appearance, Gurley appeared to be in the best of spirits; he kept glancing at his watch, however.

Gurley was attorney general of the Territory of Orleans in this year of 1807. He had been a close friend of Philip Livingston Jones, grandson of Philip Livingston, a signer of the Declaration of Independence.

Some months before the night in question, the office of sheriff had become vacant. Along with many other men, Jones had wanted the job. He asked Gurley to use his influence with the governor. Gurley promised to intercede for his friend, but, for some reason, kept postponing action on the matter.

Finally, the vacancy was filled by another man. Mutual friends of Gurley and Jones had carried tales back and forth. At last the two men realized that they were headed for the field of honor unless they did something about it. They agreed to meet in the presence of others to attempt a reconciliation. But, at the meeting, instead of smoothing over their difficulties, the two became openly antagonistic. Friends feared a peaceful settlement was hopeless.

After several more such meetings, Gurley and Jones exchanged notes. Then Gurley sent Jones a challenge, which he accepted. The weapons, pistols; the place, a field near Gurley’s home on Bayou St. John.

Jones was already on the field when Gurley arrived, having excused himself from his guests without disclosing his mission. Less than an hour later Gurley was carried home with a bullet through his heart.

Jones received a serious leg wound. During his convalescence he became grief-striken over the loss of his former friend and wrote a detailed account of the entire affair. Within a few months he, too, died—died, people said, of a broken heart.

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