The art of the duel

Speaker describes art of avenging one's honor

By ED CULLEN
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It was a lunchtime mayhem crowd at Magnolia Mound Plantation on Nicholson Drive.

About a dozen, mostly middle-aged men and women in sweaters and jackets, some of them drinking coffee from disposable cups, had dropped by the visitors' center to hear tour guide James MacDonald's lecture on dueling.

MacDonald, 27, a doctoral candidate in history at LSU, is a weekend docent at Magnolia Mound.

Magnolia Mound plantation house, owned by the people of Baton Rouge and operated by BREC, sits on 16 acres of the plantation's original 900 acres. The house was built around 1791.

It was to the visitors' center next door that the lunchtime crowd had come on a Friday to hear MacDonald's talk and to see the center's recently opened dueling exhibit.

The exhibit includes dueling pistols that belonged to George Hall, who owned Magnolia Mound from about 1848 to 1865.

There is no record of the pistols being used in an affair of honor. MacDonald knows of no duels fought in Baton Rouge, but New Orleans' City Park was the scene of many duels between 1830 and 1870. Two oaks in the park that were a convenient distance apart and provided shade for the duelists' seconds, or attendants, came to be known as The Dueling Oaks.

"But Hall was ready, just in case he was challenged to a duel," MacDonald said.

Lifting and aiming Hall's massive pistols with their "saw handle grips," was another matter, MacDonald said.

"It's hard to imagine using one hand to hold one of these pistols," he said.

City Park in New Orleans was THE place to duel with pistols, swords, daggers — even shotguns.

But in most duels, the emphasis was on saving face, not killing.

Advocate staff photos by Mark Saltz

Magnolia Mound tour guide James MacDonald provides a combatant's view of a dueling pistol's bore.

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ly about 20 percent of the combatants killed in duels,” MacDonald said. They were either wounded, the insult within the duel or the duel called off. Just showing up often enough. Honor was served.”


In son’s rules and other written guides for setting down how challenges were to be conformed, honor after the insult, how many sessions were permitted, providing for a surcharge loading pistols in front of the combatants at what distance shots were to be fired. Dueling was formalized but also illegal in many states, MacDonald said.

Other elaborates, though not written, set of uctions sprang up.

Tones were instructed to look away and men or carriage drivers who’d brought patrons to the scene of the duel weren’t allowed to approach the dueling grounds. Meetings were made to keep secret the identity of the duelists.

Secrecy provided “deniability,” MacDonald said.

Dueling came to America as a vestige of the class distinction, he said. Officers in the Continental Army fought, but by the end of the American Revolution dueling was out of favor in the heat. Dueling moved south and with it the regard for class distinction. A gentleman might ignore the challenge of a man of lower station.

James MacDonald introduces visitors to an exhibit on dueling curated by Elizabeth Brantley at Magnolia Mound. The exhibit includes dueling pistols, foreground, that belonged to George Hall, who owned the plantation before.

A gentleman might ignore the challenge of a man known to be a no-show.

Once on the dueling ground, seconds might negotiate a peaceful settlement. One form of settlement had each combatant agreeing to "waste his fire."

Of course, this required more than a little trust in one’s enemy. Some accounts of the American Hamilton-Aaron Burr duel of July 11, 1804, contended that Hamilton had announced that he would waste his fire and did.

According to some accounts, Burr, the sitting vice president in Thomas Jefferson’s government, then took careful aim and fired, his shot striking Hamilton in the hip.

The shot traveled into Hamilton’s body, mortally wounding the former secretary of the treasury.

Often, aiming one’s pistol did little good, MacDonald said. Dueling pistols were famously inaccurate, and even at a distance of 10 paces, the duelists usually missed.

“ ‘If you didn’t fire within three seconds, you were considered to be aiming,” MacDonald said.

James Sparks killed Harry Morgan in New Orleans on May 1, 1861, in a duel with shotguns at 30 paces. The duel arose from a fight at a social gathering in the Baton Rouge home of Dr. A.V. Woods.

The Aug. 14, 1826, New Orleans Argus reported that Anthony Peniston, husband of Euphemia, daughter of Armand and Constance Duplantier, owners of Magnolia Mound, was killed in a duel "his death occasioned by a stab of a poignard (dagger)."

“A distinguished lawyer, learned, amiable, scarcely 30 years of age, widowed about five months from loss of young wife whose death we have not yet ceased to deplore, he has left two young children without any other fortune but an unstained memory.

“It is said that his death was occasioned by some dispute which occurred at the last election.”

At the conclusion of his talk, MacDonald invited everyone to the re-enactment of a duel at 2 p.m. Feb. 17 at Magnolia Mound. No-shows may be subject to posting.