

WILLIAM P. ANDERSON AND "THE MAY LETTERS"

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The 1828 Presidential election campaign, when Andrew Jackson ran against John Quincy Adams, was one of the most acrid ever to convulse the electorate. The most controversial man yet nominated for the Presidency, Jackson had lived such a checkered life it was not difficult for the Adams faction to fuel their fires. Jackson was accused of everything from wife-stealing to murder. For a man who had feuded and quarreled over these issues all his adult life, these accusations were not new nor unexpected. Besides, though there was much talk, most of the opposition's accusations could not be proven.

The Arbuthnot and Ambrister executions in Florida were viewed by the common people as necessary actions of a military commander in wartime. Rachel Jackson's pure character and the Jacksons' abiding love in a good marriage had laid to rest the old marriage slanders. In a time when dueling was respectable and still practiced, the Charles Dickinson Duel was viewed by most voters as a matter of honor.

However, there had been whispers about that duel and how honorable Jackson had really been. The Whigs believed if the whispers could be proven they would have found their opponent's Achilles heel. But they needed some proof that Jackson had acted dishonorably in the duel which cost Dickinson his life. This proof was forthcoming when a Tennessee Whig, William P. Anderson of Nashville, formerly Jackson's friend, stepped forward with letters which indicated Jackson had acted dishonorably in the duel. The letters were signed by Jackson's surgeon and second in the Dickinson Duel, Dr. Francis May, and revealed circumstances of the duel not previously known publicly.

According to Anderson, the letters had been written to him years before in 1817 and he had kept them privately all these years.¹ In June and July 1828 Anderson had the letters published in the *Kentucky Reporter*. The appearance of the May letters came as a surprise to Jackson as he had believed Anderson to be his friend "up to the time of his coming forth with Dr. May's supposed letters or Anderson's forging of them."²

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¹ *Kentucky Reporter*, July 16, 1828.

² John Spencer Bassett, *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson* (Washington: Carnegie Institution, 1926) hereafter cited as Bassett, *Jackson Correspondence*, III, pp. 407-408, 425. Letter, Andrew Jackson to Major William B. Lewis, June 1828.

William Anderson and Andrew Jackson had known each other since both had come as young blades to win their fortunes in the backwoods of eastern Tennessee. They had been business associates and gaming and racing cronies in early Nashville. Jackson had raced his horses on Anderson's track; Anderson had supplied Jackson with such goodies as game cocks from Virginia and hot tips on land investments; Jackson had helped Anderson win a lieutenant-colonel's commission in the United States Army.³ Anderson had served on Jackson's staff before the War of 1812 and with the Tennessee infantry during the war.⁴ At one point during the war Rachel Jackson wrote Andrew that Colonel Anderson had been by to comfort her and pay his respects.⁵

What twists of circumstance caused two good friends to fall so far apart that one was willing to help prove the other a murderer on the eve of his election to the Presidency of the United States? The most logical way to understand this is to know something of William P. Anderson, the relatively unknown friend of Andrew Jackson.

William Preston Anderson was reared in Botetourt County, Virginia, near the town of Pattonsburg on the James River, the son of William Anderson and Margaret Patton Buchanan Anderson. His mother, youngest daughter of Col. James Patton, early land speculator in Augusta County, Virginia, had married Col. John Buchanan in 1749 by whom she had several children. After Buchanan's death she married William Anderson and had sons, Patton and William Preston Anderson. The Andersons lived at Cherry Tree Bottom, an estate on the James inherited from Col. James Patton, where they ran Anderson's Ferry and the two young sons grew to manhood. William Preston Anderson was named for William Preston, Margaret's first cousin and famous Virginia land speculator, frontiersman, and Revolutionary patriot.⁶

After the American Revolution, when the great push of western migration began, the Anderson boys had much to stimulate their interest

³ *Ibid.*, VI, pp. 425-426; The Filson Club, Preston Family Papers, Joyes Collection, Letter, W. P. Anderson to Maj. William Preston, January 28, 1811; Tennessee State Library and Archives, Letter to author, December 11, 1970 and W. E. K. Doak, "A Dictionary of Tennessee Biography," *Magazine of Tennessee History and Biography* (Nashville, Tenn.: W. E. K. Doak Publisher, 1895) hereafter cited as *Tennessee Biography*, I, no. 2, p. 18.

⁴ Bassett, *Jackson Correspondence*, III, p. 422, fn. 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, I, p. 483.

⁶ The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Draper Manuscripts, Kentucky Papers, II, p. 27. Letter, Col. Nathaniel Hart, Jr., to Lyman Draper, August 2, 1842; The Filson Club, Preston Family Papers, Joyes Collection, Letter, William P. Anderson to Maj. William Preston, January 28, 1811 and Lyman Chalkley, *Chronicles of the Scotch-Irish Settlement in Virginia Extracted from the Original Court Records of Augusta County 1745-1800* (Baltimore: The Genealogical Publishing Company, 1966) hereafter cited as *Chronicles*, II, pp. 173, 275, 278 and III, pp. 40-41.

in the west. They lived at the gates of the Wilderness Road, and must have aided many Kentucky and Tennessee bound families in crossing the James at Andersons Ferry, among whom were their own relatives. A half-brother, William Buchanan, was killed over in Kentucky; another half-brother, James Buchanan, went through Kentucky all the way to the Illinois country in 1779; a half-sister, Jane, was married to Col. John Floyd, early surveyor in Kentucky who was there killed by the Indians; another half-sister had married Joseph Drake, a Long Hunter, who accompanied the Kaspar Mansker party from New River to the Cumberland Valley as far as French Lick in 1769 and had later gone to Kentucky.⁷

By 1799 Patton Anderson was in Fayette County, Kentucky and William Preston Anderson was at Winchester, Franklin County, Tennessee and was probably the "Mr. Anderson" Andrew Jackson was seeking a political appointment for.⁸

By 1804 William had leased the Clover Bottom race-track outside Nashville where Jackson ran his horses and which Anderson later sold to Jackson and friends, John Hutchings and John Coffee.⁹

Patton Anderson joined William in Nashville where both men became involved in racing, gaming, and the bustling real-estate and mercantile business.¹⁰ Patton and William were both attracted to Andrew Jackson and became his good friends. Both Andersons were backers of Jackson's Truxton against Ploughboy in the famous 1805 horse race and shared a \$4,000.00 purse.¹¹ In these early days Jackson sought William Anderson's counsel. When Jackson received a subpoena to answer charges as to involvement in Aaron Burr's conspiracy, William told Jackson to simply tell the truth, advising that the testimony would be made public and after that "nothing dare to be said even indulgent of suspicion."¹²

While in Tennessee Aaron Burr was a guest at both Jackson's Hermitage and William Anderson's Federal Bottom. Believing "Burr's campaign was only against Mexico, and would be sanctioned by our

⁷ *Chronicles*, II, p. 173; The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Draper Manuscripts, Kentucky Papers, XVII, p. 123, Letter, Col. John Floyd to Col. William Preston, Dec. 19, 1779; *Richmond Standard*, June 5-July 3, 1880, Letter, Letitia Preston Floyd to B. R. Floyd, February 22, 1843; Edward Albright, *Early History of Middle Tennessee* (Nashville: Brandon Printing Co., 1909) p. 25 and John Carr, *Early Times in Middle Tennessee* (Nashville: E. Stevenson & F. A. Owen, 1857) pp. 52-54.

⁸ Bassett, *Jackson Correspondence*, VI, p. 422; Tennessee State Library and Archives, Letter to author, December 11, 1970.

⁹ Bassett, *Jackson Correspondence*, VI, pp. 425-426.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, The Filson Club, Preston Family Papers, Joyes Collection, Letter, William P. Anderson to Major William Preston, January 28, 1811; *Democratic Clarion*, Nov. 2, 1810.

¹¹ Bassett, *Jackson Correspondence*, VI, pp. 425-426.

¹² *Ibid.*, I, p. 181. Letter, William P. Anderson of Federal Bottom to Andrew Jackson, May 10, 1807.

government," William carried dispatches from Burr in Tennessee to Burr's son-in-law, Col. Alston in South Carolina during the fall of 1806.¹⁸ However, when he got to South Carolina, he heard of the government's action against Burr and had nothing further to do with him. Patton Anderson accepted money from Burr and "was to have descended the river after him" but did not do it.¹⁴

Patton Anderson seemed not as wise as his brother. A good-natured, passionate, hard-drinking man, he often let friends or his passions sway him.¹⁵ He appears to have been a loose talker, nearly implicating Jackson in Burr's conspiracy and causing bitterness between Jackson and the Erwins over a racing bet.¹⁶ But Patton Anderson's days were numbered. He had made bitter enemies of the Magness family and on October 24, 1810 was shot and killed in broad daylight in front of the courthouse at Shelbyville, Tennessee, by Perry Magness settling a score for the Magness family.¹⁷

In a much publicized trial powerful friends of the Andersons, Andrew Jackson, Thomas Hart Benton, Jenkin Whiteside and John Overton, assembled to prosecute the case and see Magness hung. They were able to get only a verdict of manslaughter, Perry Magness branded and jailed. At this trial Jackson first heard Thomas Hart Benton speak and came forward to congratulate Benton. From this encounter began the long Benton-Jackson friendship.¹⁸

William P. Anderson was not present but away on an exploring trip in Louisiana. He had recently lost his wife and now his only brother.¹⁹ When he returned, the loneliness which assailed him is seen in a letter to a Virginia relative asking him to "write — I don't care what its about."²⁰ From this time until 1812 Anderson tried to lose himself in his work. He wrote Virginia relatives to come view the Louisiana land which he advertised as superior to anything in Virginia, Kentucky, or Tennessee.

Writing to Major William Preston, he claimed, "It's as easy to procure a lead mine or a salt spring with fine land around them, in this country, as it is to raise game cocks or geather huckleberries in

¹⁸ *Nashville Republican and State Gazette*, October 8, 21, 1828. Letter, W. P. Anderson, Craggy Hope, near Winchester, October 8, 1828.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Democratic Clarion*, November 2, 1810.

¹⁶ Bassett, *Jackson Correspondence*, I, pp. 122-123, 128-129; III, pp. 392-393.

¹⁷ *Democratic Clarion*, November 2, 1810.

¹⁸ William N. Chambers, "Thomas Hart Benton in Tennessee, 1801-1812," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, VIII, p. 330.

¹⁹ The Tennessee Historical Society, Ac. 28, Magness Murder Case, Letter, John Overton to Mr. Coffee, October 28, 1810; The Filson Club, Preston Family Papers, Joyes Collection, Letter, William P. Anderson to Major William Preston, January 28, 1811; *Democratic Clarion*, November 2, 1810.

²⁰ The Filson Club, Preston Family Papers, Joyes Collection, Letter, William P. Anderson to Maj. William Preston, January 28, 1811.

your's. It's the finest fruit, wheat & hemp country you know of . . . come out, w'll go there & make as much lead, catch as much peltry & get as rich, as we please."²¹

The War of 1812 intervened and Anderson spent the next years in service to his country, associated with Jackson's army. In 1814 Jackson clashed in a ridiculous hotel brawl with Jesse Benton and Thomas Hart Benton, heretofore his friends. The result of the brawl was Jesse's bullet lodged in Jackson for life and a bitter enmity established between the Bentons and Jackson. Jesse was alienated for a lifetime, but Thomas Hart later forgave Jackson and became a staunch supporter.²² For the present, hatred of Jackson spread like ripples among the Bentons and relatives, one of whom was William Anderson, Thomas Hart's close friend and cousin of Thomas's wife.²³ It appears that the Benton-Jackson feud was the beginning of William Anderson's enmity toward Jackson.

After the war another quarrel arose that involved Jackson and someone even closer to Anderson, General John Adair, Anderson's father-in-law.²⁴ General Adair had commanded Kentuckians at New Orleans and Jackson accused some Kentuckians of cowardice. Adair's defense of the Kentuckians made him Governor of Kentucky and started a long-running feud with Jackson.²⁵ By 1817 General Adair was evidently contemplating a duel to settle matters. At this time William Anderson determined to discover exactly what had occurred at the Dickinson Duel so he could forewarn General Adair as to Jackson's methods. Since there was an impression in Tennessee that Dickinson had been murdered, Anderson wrote Dr. Francis May and received the following letters, here quoted in part.

Nashville, September 16, 1817

Dear Sir:

. . . I would advise Gen. Adair to write to some friend in Washington City, and procure a statement from Dr. Catlett, who was Dickinson's second. If this fellow will come out like a man of truth and courage, he will damn the reputation of Gen. Jackson as a man of honor at least. Gen. Overton and myself conversed this matter all over only a few weeks ago. Overton laughed most heartily at the certificate he had obtained from Catlett (that the duel was fair and honorable) it was 8 or 10 days before Catlett would give it to him during which time Overton consulted with me several times, and I at last advised him to bully him out of it by threats, which succeeded; you must obtain a true certificate from Catlett before you make

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Ralph K. Andrist, *Andrew Jackson, Soldier and Statesman* (New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc., 1963) pp. 51-54, 101.

²³ Benton's wife was a McDowell descendant of William Preston, the man for whom William Preston Anderson had been named.

²⁴ *Kentucky Reporter*, July 16, 1828.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

use of my name — not because I fear the vindictive violence of Jackson, but because my information comes from Overton & he having Catlett's certificate would leave me in a very unpleasant situation. Overton would certainly swear the truth. If a statement can be had from either of them, Gen. Adair shall have a certificate or anything from me he desires, touching that . . ."

Yours,

Francis May

The foregoing is a true copy of the original now in my possession in the handwriting of Dr. Francis May.

William P. Anderson

Nashville, September 17, 1817

Dear Sir:

. . . I can see no reason why Gen. Adair must have any person's name, can't he give it as well founded rumor? It was expressly stipulated that a snap should constitute a fire but it unfortunately was not reduced to writing, the General denied having snapped, and said his damned pistol had stopped at half bent. Dickinson did not see it, he must have thought Jackson reserved his fire, which he had a right to do — He did not look at Jackson, but turned his head sidewise after firing.

The General has led the most quarrelsome, drunken, riotous life, of any man in this state; he has had quarrels from Jonesborough to Nashville — Maclin caned him in Knoxville. I was present in town. He has abused W. T. Lewis times without number, in public and in private for a rogue . . .

General Overton and General Jackson both came to my house to get my certificate on the affair — I certified with regard to the snapping, this they twice urged me to omit — I told them it would never do to deny the fact, that it was with them to justify it. The certificate concluded by stating, that it was fairly and honorably conducted as far as the rules and regulations of the parties came to my knowledge from the late publication of them. Nothing was published on the subject of a snap constituting a fire, because it was not reduced to writing . . . and this is what will bear me out.

Jackson made a publication after he obtained my certificate; he thought proper however not to publish my certificate in toto, but an extract from it. The first time I see Overton I will converse with him again; he cannot back out in my presence. Let Gen. Adair . . . inquire of Catlett whether they are not true; he cannot deny them. In the General's life we are told his "private character is without reproach!"

Francis May

. . . The foregoing is a true copy of the original in the handwriting of Dr. Francis May now in my possession

W. P. Anderson²⁶

Adair never challenged Jackson, so Anderson did not have to reveal the May letters publicly, not, that is, until 1828 when Jackson's foes were marshaling every resource to defeat him.

²⁶ *Kentucky Reporter*, July 16, 1828.

Though Jackson may not have known it or wanted to admit it, Anderson had turned against him long before 1828. Others knew of Anderson's enmity as Anderson was accused in 1820 of attempting to get a letter (relating to a matter other than the Dickinson Duel) which would damage Jackson's reputation.²⁷

Even if Jackson had not verbally and physically assaulted Anderson's friends and relatives, the two would have drifted apart due to political differences. By 1825 the Democratic Party was breaking into two factions, the Democratic Republicans and the National Republicans or Whigs. The common people were represented by Jackson and the Democratic Republicans and the business interests were represented by the National Republicans. Anderson's extensive business interests were better served by the National Republicans.

When the May letters were published Jackson was enraged, writing, "If I had heard of them before brought before the nation as President, Anderson would not have been in this world or I would have been in my grave."²⁸ He named Anderson, Adair, Benton and others as members of a combination against him.

As for Dr. May, Jackson threatened, "Before the *Little Doctor* gets out of the scrape he will wish he had let the Tennessee farmer alone on his farm."²⁹

Shortly after publication of the May letters the Whigs found still another letter which they hoped to publish showing Jackson had been involved in Burr's conspiracy. When shown this letter William Anderson said the letter showed "not enough proof" and related to an "entirely different matter." When the Whigs continued to pursue this subject Anderson wrote a letter absolving Jackson of guilt in his relations with Aaron Burr which was published in the Jackson paper, the *Nashville Republican and State Gazette*, October 21, 1828.³⁰ An honorable man, Anderson was willing to publish the May letters which he believed true, but would not sanction publication of false accusations against Jackson.

William P. Anderson feared Andrew Jackson as a man and as President and knew he would receive counter-attacks but was willing to take the risks. Jackson and friends did accuse Anderson of fraudulent business practices and asserted Anderson was being used by others since he "is a man whose mind is much disturbed and shattered."³¹

Anderson believed himself in the right and defended himself. Part

²⁷ Bassett, *Jackson Correspondence*, III, p. 6.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, III, pp. 425 and 442.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 423 and 442.

³⁰ *Nashville Republican and State Gazette*, September 26, October 7 and 21, 1828.

³¹ *Ibid.*, September 23 and November 11, 1828.

of his defense seen in an open letter to Andrew Jackson was not that of a mentally ill man.

In the Nashville Republican you have attacked my character. This is your usual mode of warfare, when charges are preferred against you by those who do not think that you ought to be President of the United States. They must be laid prostrate. In this way you divert public attention to their case, that they may lose sight of your own. My only crime is, that I have been instrumental in the publication of Dr. May's letters. So far as they relate to the duel between yourself and Dickinson, showing that you killed Dickinson unfairly, is to me a source of deep regret, I believe it to be true, that you did kill Dickinson unfairly, and that you yourself are conscious of it. The charge has not been met and refuted to my satisfaction. I was well acquainted with all the parties concerned in this duel, and do know that Dr. May was incapable of falsehood or prevarication. You impliedly admit this fact when you resist the proof of your guilt by alleging these letters to be forgeries, though I do not believe you have the remotest idea they are so. The letters are deposited in Nashville, open for the inspection of everybody . . . you are incapable of expending any charity toward those who happen to differ with you in opinion. . . . When you become the enemy of any man, you will pull him down if you can, no matter by what means, fair or foul, honorable or dishonorable; and if it be consistent with your views of popularity and interest, you will turn about and support the very man you have before attempted to destroy and pull down. These examples will suffice for the present: the Hon. Wm. H. Crawford, Gen. John Adair, and Col. Thos. H. Benton."⁸²

Anderson's attempts to stop Jackson were in vain. Jackson won the election and Anderson faded from the public eye returning to his business concerns and the rearing of his family. He had married again and had young sons coming along, one of whom was destined to be the Confederate General James Patton Anderson.⁸³ Nearly four decades from 1828, General James P. Anderson would surrender with Johnston's Army in North Carolina. Before that time in the battles of Shiloh, Murfreesboro, Chickamauga, Chattanooga, and the defense of Florida, he would display courage not unlike that of his father, William P. Anderson, when attacking the Achilles heel of "fire-eater" General Andrew Jackson.⁸⁴

⁸² *Banner and Whig*, October 3, 1828.

⁸³ *Tennessee Biography* I, no. 2, p. 19.

⁸⁴ Ezra J. Warner, *Generals In Gray, Lives of the Confederate Commanders* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959) p. 7.