

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF COLONEL SOLOMON P. SHARP  
PART 1: UPRIGHTNESS AND INVENTIONS; SNARES AND NETS

J.W. Cooke

The dirk (of Spanish steel or made from a hunting knife or Revolutionary sword) and the Bible might lie side by side on the table, or Plato and the dueling pistols on the mantel shelf. A man might die for honor or kill for arrogance. . . . It was a land of the fiddle and whisky, sweat and prayer, pride and depravity.

Robert Penn Warren,  
*World Enough and Time: A Romantic Novel*, 12

The Beauchamp-Sharp affair has occupied a minor but established place in the historiography of Kentucky and of the United States. First publicized in the press and periodicals of the period (1825-1826), it became a subject for fiction (Charles Fenno Hoffman's *Greyslayer* and William Gilmore Simms's *Beauchamp*), drama (Edgar Allan Poe's unfinished *Polittan*), and history (J.G. Dana and R.S. Thomas's *Beauchamp's Trial*).

Later historians and authors have also found the events and personalities of the Beauchamp-Sharp affair compelling. L. F. Johnson devoted thirteen pages of his *Tragedies and Trials* to it; J. Winston Coleman later published a book-length account of the events in 1950. That same year Robert Penn Warren used the story as a vehicle for a critique of romantic values in *World Enough and Time*. More recently Richard Taylor has rehearsed the affair for a general audience in *Three Kentucky Tragedies*. In 1992 an outdoor drama by John Hawkins, *Wounded Is the Wounding Heart*, was performed in Frankfort.

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Yet surprisingly little attention has been given to the lives of the actors in this Gothic melodrama. Dr. Leander Sharp's *Vindication* provided some biographical information about his brother, Solomon, Anna Beauchamp, and Patrick Darby, but its purpose was clearly exculpatory and accusatory, not biographical. So, for that matter, was Beauchamp's *Confession*. Lewis Collins and H. Levin wrote brief, laudatory sketches of Sharp's life based largely, it appears, on the *Vindication*. The same holds true for the other principals. Neither Dr. Sharp nor Beauchamp was a model of objectivity. The spurious *Letters of Ann Cook* are not to be relied upon. The author of the *Life of Jereboam O. Beauchamp* added little and in any event suffered a loss of credibility because he (or she) chose to remain anonymous. Only the life of Anna Cook(e) Beauchamp has received recent and scholarly attention.<sup>1</sup>

The colonel deserves equal treatment. His life has great intrinsic interest. If not quite the substance of tragedy, at least we find ourselves viewing a riveting melodrama involving pride and depravity, life and death, with the colonel as a protagonist. Knowledge of who he was and how he lived can help us understand the culture of antebellum Kentuckians and their extraordinarily intense politics.

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1 J. G. Dana and R. S. Thomas, eds., *Beauchamp's Trial. A Report of Jereboam O. Beauchamp before the Franklin Circuit Court in May 1826 . . . For the Murder of Col. Solomon P. Sharp* (Frankfort, 1826); L. F. Johnson, *Famous Kentucky Tragedies and Trials* (Cleveland, 1943 reprint: first published in 1916), 44-57; Richard Taylor, *Three Kentucky Tragedies* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991); L. J. Sharp, *Vindication of the Character of the Late Col. Solomon P. Sharp from the Calumnies Published Against Him Since His Murder by Patrick Darby and Jereboam O. Beauchamp* (Frankfort, 1827); Jereboam O. Beauchamp, *The Confession of Jereboam O. Beauchamp*, ed. Robert Bamberg (Philadelphia: the Mathew Carey Library of English and American Literature, 1966); Lewis Collins, *Historical Sketches of Kentucky . . .* (Maysville, Ky. and Cincinnati, Ohio, 1848); H. Levin, ed., *The Lawyers and Lawmakers of Kentucky* (Chicago, 1897); Fred Johnson has demonstrated that *The Letters of Ann Cook . . .* (Washington, D.C., 1826) is spurious; see "Letters of Ann Cook: Fact or Factoid?," *Border States* 6 (1987): 13-21; [Author unknown], *The Life of Jereboam Beauchamp . . .* (Frankfort, 1850); see J. W. Cooke, "Portrait of a Murderess: Anna Cook(e) Beauchamp," *Filson Club History Quarterly*, 65 (1991): 209-30 (hereafter *Quarterly*). For a brief recapitulation and reinterpretation, see J. W. Cooke, "'Pride and Depravity': A Preliminary Reexamination of the Beauchamp-Sharp Affair," *Border States* 6 (1987): 1-12.

This was Sharp's world — a world in which he thrived and then was struck down.

Solomon Porcius Sharp was born 22 August 1787 in Washington County, Virginia, possibly in the settlement of Abingdon. The origins and movements of his parents, Thomas and Jean Maxwell Sharp, are often obscure and sometimes impossible to trace. What follows is no more than a reasonable conjecture.

Born in Pennsylvania about 1742, Thomas was a resident of Washington County by 1770. He married Jean Maxwell, a native of Scotland, in February or March 1775.<sup>2</sup> Thomas farmed and participated in the civic affairs of the community. Like most men living on the frontier, he was an active member of the militia. In November 1778 Thomas was commissioned an ensign in the Washington County militia and three years later participated in the expedition mustered on the western waters to attack Major Patrick Ferguson's Tories. At King's Mountain he fought and survived to celebrate the victory.<sup>3</sup>

Thomas returned to his home in Virginia, where he and his family remained for nine years. In 1790 Sharp sold all or a part of his holdings in Washington County to Robert Craig. Apparently he had already moved his family to a 593-acre tract in Sullivan County, North Carolina.<sup>4</sup> Four years later the Sharps moved a second time, on this occasion to Davidson County where in July 1788 Thomas received a

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2 Genealogies found in the Sharp folder, Goodnight Public Library, Franklin, Kentucky (hereafter Sharp folder, Goodnight Library); Sharp, *Vindication*, 4; *Biographical Dictionary of the American Congress, 1774-1971* (Washington, D.C., 1971), 1683, gives his date of birth as 1780. I have, however, accepted the date given by Dr. Sharp and the colonel's family. See also, Lela W. Prewitt "Notebook" (2 vols.; Fairfield, Iowa, n.d.), 1: 179.

3 Lewis Preston Summers, *Annals of Southwestern Virginia, 1769-1800* (Abingdon, Virginia, 1929), 999, 1000, 1003, 1007, 1011; Sharp, *Vindication*, 4; Pat Alderman, *The Overmountain Men* (Johnson City, Tennessee, 1986; first published in 1970), 118, 125; Lyman Draper, *King's Mountain and Its Heroes: History of the Battle of King's Mountain, October 7, 1780, and the Events Which Lead to It* (Baltimore, 1881) does not mention Thomas Sharp and neither does Francis B. Heltman, *Historical Register of Officers of the Continental Army During the War of the Revolution April 1775, to December, 1783 With Addenda by Robert H. Kelby, 1932* (Baltimore, 1982).

4 Summers, *Annals*, 1289; North Carolina Grant #334, Sullivan County, Book 15, 255, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.

North Carolina grant of six hundred and forty acres on the Big Harpeth River.<sup>5</sup>

Between 1788 and 1795 Thomas, Jean, and their growing family moved a third time. In 1795 Thomas witnessed a will in Logan County, Kentucky, about sixty-five miles northwest of Davidson County. His name also appears on a state tax list prepared that year by Young Ewing. He bought two hundred acres on Muddy River northeast of Russellville in 1796; more acreage was added in the next two years.<sup>6</sup>

Solomon was the fifth child and third son. He probably grew up in the archetypal log cabin on the banks of the Muddy River, sharing with his parents, brothers, and sisters the joys, sorrows, and labors of clearing the land and cultivating it.

His education was scanty. Lewis Collins described the Logan County of Sharp's childhood as "almost a desert"; yet some formal instruction was available. Lewis Moore kept a school of some sort at the head spring of the Muddy in 1796 or 1797. The renowned James McGready instructed a few pupils in 1798. Newton Academy was founded in Russellville in December 1798; Logan Academy was founded six years later. It strains credulity to the limit, however, to assert, as did H. Levin, that the youthful Sharp acquired "a masterful knowledge of Latin and Greek while following the plow."<sup>7</sup>

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5 North Carolina Grant #245, Davidson County, Book G-7, 132, Tennessee State Library and Archives; Richard Carlton Fulcher, comp., *1780-1790 Census of the Cumberland Settlements: An Enumeration of the Inhabitants of Record in Davidson County, Being at Times, in North Carolina, and the Territory South of the River Ohio* (Brentwood, Tennessee: n.p., n.d.), 90.

6 Lalla McCulley, comp., *Logan County Kentucky Records* (Lewisburg, Kentucky, 1969), 42, 45; "Department of State Archives Logan County Tax Lists—1795," *Register of the Kentucky State Historical Society*, 23 (1925): 11; A.B. Wilhite, comp., *Abstracts from Survey Book A Logan County Sept., 1796 — Jan., 1797* (Russellville: n.p., n.d.), 7; Mrs. J. Wells Vick, comp., *Logan County Kentucky Deed Book A-1* (Russellville, 1963-1964), 5, 10, 18.

7 George D. Blakey, *Men Whom I Remember Number Fourteen* (Russellville, Kentucky, 1877-1880), 52; genealogies from the Sharp folder, Goodnight Library; Collins, *Historical Sketches*, 311; Alex C. Finley, *The History of Russellville and Logan County, Ky.* (Russellville, 1879), Vol. I, Bks. II and III, 11, 20, 21, 35, 53; Edward Coffman, *The Story of Logan County* (Nashville, 1962), 55-56, 117; Charles Thomas Cannon, "History of Education in Logan County, Kentucky" (MA thesis, University of

There were other significant influences besides the ax, hoe, plow, and, perhaps, the schoolroom. Solomon was brought up in "Regulator" country. Pitched battles between outlaws and law-abiding citizens were frequent during the turbulent early years of Logan County's existence. The sociopathic Harpe brothers cut a murderous swath through the countryside; Samuel Mason, the notorious robber and murderer, was an early resident. In his autobiography the Reverend Peter Cartwright recalled that in his youth Logan County was known as "Rogue's Harbor," and Cartwright's childhood reminiscences tended to confirm the label.<sup>8</sup>

Solomon also witnessed and perhaps participated in that extraordinary evangelical Protestant eruption known as the Second Great Awakening. It is probable that he, like Peter Cartwright, heard the inspiring words of James McGready, since that divine preached at Muddy River Church in September 1798 and at other churches throughout Logan County. The Sharps were apparently Presbyterians, as was McGready, the Reverend John Rankin, and many other preachers prominent in the revival movement.<sup>9</sup>

Somehow Sharp found time to read, study, and so compensate to some extent for the intellectual deficiencies of his time and place. Whether through solitary concentration or in some local lawyer's

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Kentucky, 1929), 1-7; see also, *Russellville Mirror*, 7 July 1808, [4]; Levin, ed. *Lawyers and Lawmakers*, 110.

8 Finley, *History of Russellville and Logan County*, 6, 8, 25-26, 40; Richard Maxwell Brown, "The American Vigilante Tradition," in Hugh Davis Graham and Ted Robert Gurr, eds., *The History of Violence in America: Historical and Comparative Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 222; J. L. McConel, *Western Characters or Types of Border Life in the United States* (New York, 1853), 171-245; Otto A. Rothert, *The Outlaws of Cave-in-the-Rock: Historical Accounts of the Famous Highwaymen and River Pirates who operated in Pioneer Days upon the Ohio and Mississippi rivers and over the old Natchez Trace* (Cleveland, 1924), 103-105, 165; Charles L. Wallis, ed., *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright* (New York, 1956), 25-35.

9 John B. Boles, *The Great Revival, 1787-1805* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1972), 43-50, 52-58; Rev. James Smith, ed., *The Posthumous Works of the Reverend and Pious James McGready* (2 vols.; Louisville, 1831-1833), 1: ix-xvi; Summers, *Annals*, 1354; Thomas Whitaker, "The Gasper River Meeting House," *Quarterly* 56 (1982): 30-61; James McGready's intellectual and emotional milieu is described in Paul Conkin, "What Caldwell's Boys Did in the Cumberland," *Border States* 10 (1995): 5-15.

office he gained enough knowledge of the law to pass a bar examination. Sometime between 1806 and 1809 Sharp began to practice law in Russellville.<sup>10</sup>

Apparently he prospered. In 1810 he began to acquire land through purchase and grants in Logan, Warren, Christian, and Livingston counties. Sometimes alone, sometimes in partnership with his younger brother Dr. Leander Sharp (a physician who practiced in Bowling Green), he continued these speculations until April 1824. Altogether Sharp owned or shared ownership of over eleven thousand acres, much of it in Warren County north of the Barren River.<sup>11</sup>

Sometime between 1806 and 1809 Sharp left Russellville and moved to Bowling Green, perhaps in search of a loftier venue for his ambition. The county seat of Warren County was a rapidly growing and advantageously situated settlement twenty-five miles northeast of Russellville with an 1810 population of one hundred and fifty-four. Sharp soon earned the respect of his neighbors. In 1809 and 1811 the voters of Warren County chose him as their state representative. At the age of twenty-two he was launched upon a successful political career.

Sharp displayed industry and acumen in performing his legislative duties. His first recorded initiative was a bill proposing a

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10 Sharp, *Vindication*, xx, 4; Levin, ed., *Lawyers and Lawmakers*, 110; Finley, *History of Russellville and Logan County*, 20-21, writes that there had been lawyers in Logan County since 1793; by 1798 six were reported practicing. James F. Hopkins, ed., *The Rising Statesman, 1797-1814*, vol. 1 of *The Papers of Henry Clay* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1959), 777, claims that Sharp began his practice in 1809. The author of an anonymous document asserts that Sharp was licensed to practice law at nineteen; see Sharp folder, Goodnight Library. The writer appears to have been from Logan County. This claim was confirmed in Sharp's obituary; see *Argus of Western America*, 30 November 1825 (hereafter *Argus*) and Sharp, *Vindication*, 4.

11 Willard Rouse Jillson, *The Kentucky Land Grants* (1<sup>st</sup> publication series, no. 33; Louisville: The Filson Club Historical Society, 1925), 399-400, 708-709. Sharp also bought both land and town lots. He paid \$14,355.00 for at least 2,307 acres in Warren County and six lots in Bowling Green. See, for instance, Deed Book E5 Warren County, 89-91 and Deed Book G7 Warren County, 336-38. These purchases began in May 1810 and continued until September 1822. Occasionally he also sold land and lots. See Deed Book HS Warren County, 474-75 and Deed book K 10 Warren County, 337-38, 341-42.

state bounty for the killing of wolves. During the first session he supported Henry Clay's election to the United States Senate, the creation of an academy in Barren County, and a state lottery, in addition to serving on a number of committees. His performance was sufficiently impressive to gain him a short term as interim speaker of the house during the second session.<sup>12</sup>

Returning in 1811 Sharp voted against harsh legislation affecting the welfare of slaves. Later he would give his support to a bill "more effectually to suppress the practice of duelling." In both the 1810 and 1811 sessions concern was expressed over nonpayment for lands purchased by settlers or speculators south of the Green River, that part of the state in which Sharp lived and where his property was located. Although his interests and those of his constituents were directly affected, there is no evidence that he played a prominent role in the discussions of the issue.<sup>13</sup>

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12 *Journal of the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Kentucky* (Frankfort, 1810), 4, 16, 37, 48, 55, 120, 143, 175, 184, 234 (hereafter *Journal of the House*). Ironically, the academy created was probably attended by Jereboam Beauchamp. Oddly, Sharp is not listed in the federal census of 1810 as a resident of Warren County.

13 *Ibid.*, 213, 30, 171-72; *Journal of the House* (Frankfort, 1811), 173-74. Until 1795 these lands south of the Green River had been reserved for the satisfaction of military warrants issued to Virginia veterans of the American Revolution. In that year, however, the legislature passed a law informing settlers of the region who did not possess these warrants but who had, nevertheless, taken up lands there that they might under specified conditions "be entitled to hold any quantity of such land not exceeding two hundred acres." It is possible that Thomas Sharp took advantage of this law. Much of the land, however, had not been paid for by 1810. Solomon Sharp also acquired old Kentucky grants and Kentucky land warrants. The former were issued by the commonwealth. They included reaffirmation of grants already made by Virginia and also military, seminary, academic, treasury, and preemption grants. Kentucky land warrants were created by the legislature in 1815 to encourage settlement of "so much waste and unappropriated lands as he or she shall desire to purchase" at the price of twenty dollars a hundred acres. See Jillson, *Land Grants*, 8-9. Dale Maurice Royalty writes that the debt owed by landowners south of the Green River was a "public scandal"; see his "Banking, Politics and the Commonwealth, 1800-1825" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kentucky, 1971), 31. Lucius P. Little, *Ben Hardin: His Times and Contemporaries with Selections from His Speeches* (Louisville, 1887), 41, 46, quotes Hardin as saying that Sharp guided the antiduelling proposal through the legislature.

Sharp's legislative duties ended in February 1812. Four months later the United States declared war on Great Britain and thousands of Kentuckians rushed to support their country in redeeming its honor on the battlefield. Sharp delayed joining the colors until 18 September. He then enlisted as private in Captain John Williams's Company of the Kentucky Mounted Volunteer Militia commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Young Ewing. Just twelve days later Sharp was promoted to major and assigned to Colonel Ewing's staff, surely something of a record even for a militia regiment.<sup>14</sup>

The Kentucky Mounted Volunteer Militia consisted of 406 officers and men recruited in southern Kentucky. It was part of a four-thousand-man expedition under the faltering command of Major General Samuel Hopkins organized for the purpose of attacking the Shawnee towns on the Wabash and Illinois rivers.

In late September or early October Hopkins led his slackly disciplined troops across the Ohio River to a temporary encampment at Busseron, ten miles below Vincennes in Indiana Territory. Leaving about half of his men at Busseron, Hopkins led the remainder to Fort Harrison on the east side of the Wabash, where they arrived on 10 October. Five days later the troops marched out of the fort towards (they supposed) their Shawnee antagonists.

Their advance was doomed to frustration and failure. The competence of the guides came under suspicion. Supplies ran low, and the expedition's horses began to show signs of fatigue. Doubts concerning General Hopkins's abilities surfaced. Desertions, already noticeable, increased. Finally, on 19 October, the enemy set fire to the prairie in front of the advancing Kentuckians. The next day the general and field officers met with General Hopkins. It was decided to abandon all offensive operations and return to Fort Harrison. On 30 October Sharp's military career came to an end at Busseron. He had served a total of forty-two days. His grateful country rewarded this sacrifice with compensation amounting to \$118.93 in pay and

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14 Minnie S. Wilder, comp., *Kentucky Soldiers of the War of 1812* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1969), 255, 257; Military Record of Solomon P. Sharp, National Archives, Washington, D.C.



allowances. Acutely aware of the political value of a military record, Sharp parlayed this brief and bloodless interlude into an eventual promotion to colonel of the Twenty-fifth Militia Regiment.<sup>15</sup>

Of course Sharp's military record, however brief, would do his campaign for a seat in the United States House of Representatives no harm. His established abilities as a lawyer would also help as would his record of attentive concern for the wishes of his constituents in the state legislature. His campaign was successful, and Sharp was sent to Washington in 1812. As a freshman member of the thirteenth Congress at the age of twenty-five (the minimum age at which one could become a member) he may have been the youngest man in Congress.

The first session began its deliberations on 24 May 1813 with Sharp in attendance. Less than a month later the freshman congressman announced his presence with a spirited defense of Madison's decision to lead the country into a second war with Great Britain. Obviously identifying with the War Hawks, he quoted an obscure fragment of verse to underscore his point:

Fresh leaves of martial laurel  
Shall shade the soldier's grave,  
Who dies with arm uplifted  
His country's right to save!

He spoke a second time in defense of the administration on 11 January 1814.

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15 "The Expedition of Major-General Samuel Hopkins Up the Wabash 1812: The Letters of Captain Robert Hamilton," *Indiana Magazine of History* XLIII (December 1947): 393-402; Military Record of Solomon P. Sharp, National Archives; Robert B. McAfee, *History of the Late War in the Western Country* (Lexington, 1816), 158-60; James W. Hammack, Jr., *Kentucky and the Second American Revolution: The War of 1812* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1976), 44-46; Anderson Chenault Quisenberry, *Kentucky in the War of 1812* (Frankfort, 1915), 185. Thomas Beauchamp, the father of Sharp's killer, was a private in Ewing's regiment. See Franklin Gorin, *The Times of Long Ago: Barren County, Kentucky* (Louisville, 1929), 44. The importance of a military career for political preferment in Kentucky politics is stressed in Albert D. Kirwan, *John J. Crittenden: The Struggle for the Union* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1962), 25-26. Sharp's military career after the War of 1812 is referred to incidentally in Draper Collection, SC190 and Arndt Stickles, ed., "Joseph Underwood's Fragmentary Journal," *Quarterly*, 13 (1939): 205.

Two months later in "an animated speech of more than an hour," he opposed indemnification for those defrauded in the Yazoo Claims case, and on 8 April he denounced a bill "to prescribe the mode of prosecuting and deciding controversies between two or more states." Thus ended the first and second sessions.<sup>16</sup>

During the third session of the thirteenth Congress began 19 September 1814, Sharp again expatiated upon the subject of "national honor." He supported a resolution to weaken the British offensive effort by granting each British deserter one hundred acres and also questioned the wisdom of exempting those areas of Maine under enemy occupation from collection of a direct tax. Sharp also gave his support to a congressional proposal to buy Thomas Jefferson's library.

In November 1814 Sharp began what would be a consistent and critical analysis of the proposed Second Bank of the United States. He returned to this subject on eight subsequent occasions, positioning himself alongside John C. Calhoun as a supporter, although one with many reservations.

One last effusion of admiration for martial ardor excited Sharp to public address. Speaking in praise of the courage shown by Louisianians during the fighting below New Orleans he once again resorted to poetic tribute:

If humanity shows to the God of this world,  
A sight for his fatherly eye,  
It is when a people, with banner unfurl'd,  
Resolve for their freedom to die.

Addressing another contemporary issue, Sharp spoke in February 1815 to support the creation of a five-thousand-man peacetime army. And so the session ended.

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16 [The Author of the Thirty Years' View], *Abridgement of the Debates of Congress, From 1789 to 1856* (16 vols.; New York, 1861), V, 50-53, 125, 292, 293. Among those with whom Sharp served were Henry Clay, General Samuel Hopkins, Richard M. Johnson, Joseph Desha, and Ben Hardin. Sharp also represented Clay in an action between Clay and James Smith, Jr. On the basis of a letter from Sharp to Clay, 27 January 1813, the reader might conclude that Sharp was, at best, semilliterate. His spelling was abominable and his sentences badly constructed. See Hopkins, ed., *Rising Statesman*, 777.

The first session of the Fourteenth Congress began 4 December 1815. Sharp found himself in a politically sensitive position from which he was unable to extricate himself successfully. Asked to vote for legislation to raise the pay of congressmen, he temporarily lost sight of his constituents' aversion to higher taxes and supported the measure. Returning to Washington in December 1816, he reversed his position and voted to repeal the offending legislation. Sharp had gotten the message but too late. As George D. Blakey remembered it, this slip cost him his seat in Congress, although there were probably other factors as well.<sup>17</sup> His political ambitions temporarily frustrated, Sharp returned to Bowling Green to practice law and manage his expanding estate. He did not, however, remain a private citizen for long.

The citizens of Warren County returned him once more to the legislature as their representative in 1817. The session began in December. Financial affairs soon claimed his attention. Sharp gave his support to legislation creating what were termed "several Independent banks" and to a proposed tax on the Kentucky branches of the Bank of the United States. He also served as a member of a committee charged with modifying and amending existing law concerning the state bank and its branches. He would later give his support to a much-amended version of the original legislation creating independent banks. Sharp also endorsed internal improvements but opposed legislation giving ministers free use of turnpikes, setting up a state medical board with power to license doctors, the creation of a new county out of parts of Warren, Logan, and Allen, and a proposal to open up the state's vacant lands to the widows and orphans of soldiers killed in the War of 1812.<sup>18</sup>

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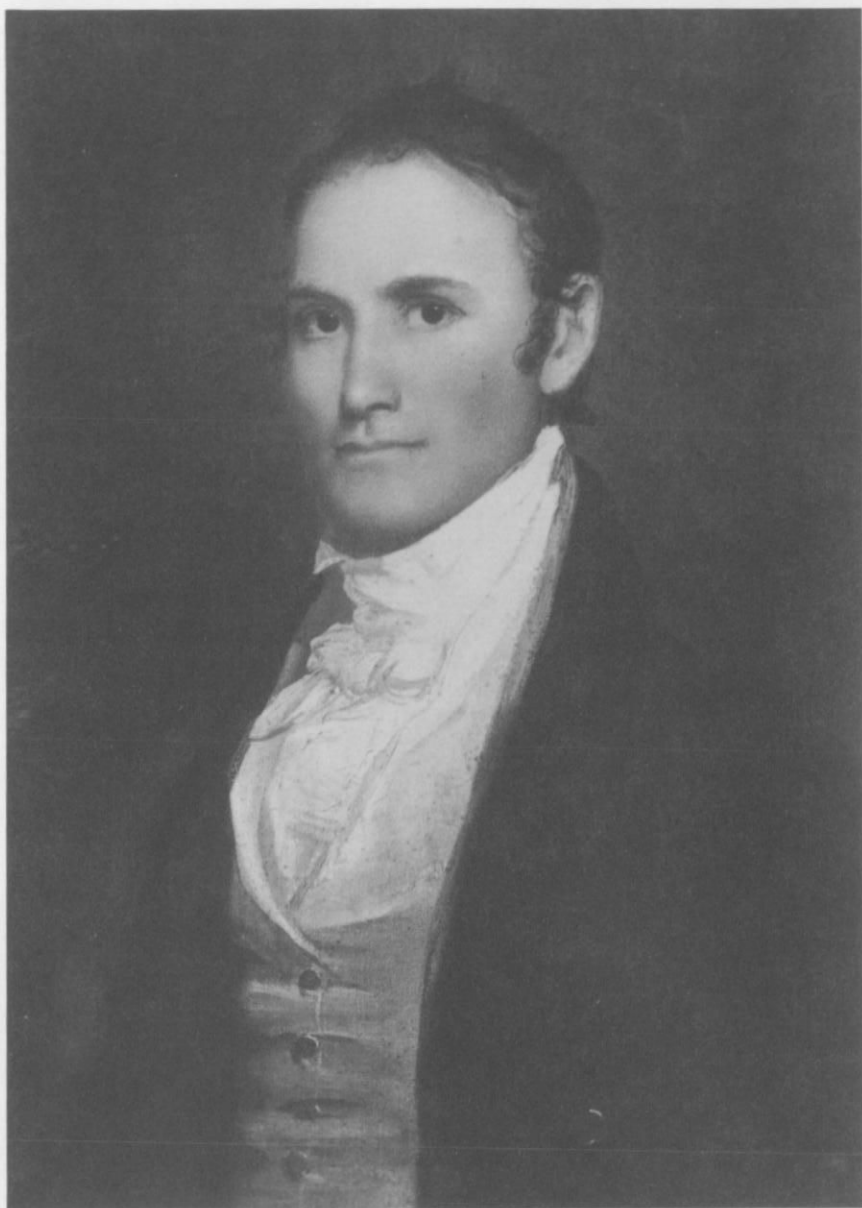
17 [The Author of the Thirty Years' View], *Abtrdgement of the Debates of Congress*, V, 327-28, 363, 365, 412, 424-25, 605-606, 627, 430, 621, 695; Blakey, *Men Whom I Remember*, 53; Collins, *Historical Sketches*, 312, reports that John C. Calhoun called Sharp "the ablest man of his age that had ever crossed the mountains." While Calhoun may have said this, he does not seem to have put his opinion on paper because there are no references to Sharp in his papers. The author of the patriotic doggerel has not been identified. Could it have been Anna Cooke? See also Little, *Ben Hardin*, 71, 76.

18 *Journal of the House* (Frankfort, 1817), 62, 165, 167, 279, 177, 120, 183, 329.



*Colonel Solomon P. Sharp*

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Sharp returned to Frankfort in December 1818, to serve his final term in the House. On 18 December he married Eliza Allen, a resident of Frankfort and a daughter of the late Dr. John Allen, a physician and an officer in the First Regiment of the Kentucky militia, during the War of 1812. Nothing is known of how he met Eliza, how the courtship proceeded, or what the Allens thought of their new relation. Nor do we know the reactions of Sharp's brothers and sisters to Eliza. Presumably all was civility between the Allens and the Sharps, two families separated both by geography and social position. Solomon had succeeded in bridging the gap. In legislative sessions he defended the state's anti-duelling law and supported two proposals to obtain revenue in the form of either taxes or fees from the Bank of the United States. Sharp was notably active in scrutinizing banking legislation. When the term ended he again returned to Bowling Green, this time with his bride.<sup>19</sup>

A few months after Sharp resumed residence in Bowling Green Anna Cooke conceived, probably in September 1819. She was then thirty-four years old and unmarried, the sixth child and first daughter of Giles and Alicia Cooke of Fairfax County, Virginia. Her father, a moderately successful planter, had died in 1805. Most of the family, after liquidating his estate, had moved in successive waves to Warren County. The first to appear was Giles Cooke, Jr., who was listed as a taxpayer in 1806. In 1807 he began acquiring land on Drake's Creek outside Bowling Green. That same year the widowed Alicia and John W. Cooke became residents. Between 1806 and 1810, Anna, Littleton, and Thomas also settled in Warren County.<sup>20</sup>

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19 Ibid., 10-11, 120, 164-65, 195, 198-200, 204, 232, 247, 249, 250, 251, 252, 260, 282, 283; G. Glenn Clift, *Remember the Raisin! Kentucky and Kentuckians in the Battles and Massacre at Frenchtown, Michigan Territory, in the War of 1812* (Frankfort, 1961), 119; Royalty, "Banking, Politics and the Commonwealth," 230, 250, notes that the Green River country was already moving toward debtor relief in 1819. The Bluegrass region was moving in the other direction.

20 Dr. and Mrs. William Carter Stubbs, *Descendants of Mordecai Cooke of "Mordecai's Mount" Gloucester Co. Va. 1650 and Thomas Booth, of Ware Neck Gloucester Co. Va. 1685* (New Orleans, 1923), 99-100, 102; Jillson, *Land Grants*, 289. This was a land grant south of the Green River. Giles's father, also named Giles, had acquired an old Kentucky grant of 1,115 acres in Lincoln County along with his

Apparently the Cookes brought some capital with them, although they could not have been considered wealthy. In the 1810 census Alicia was listed as the owner of twelve slaves; Giles had seven and John W. three. Anna does not appear on the tax list. Despite this modest affluence Dr. Leander Sharp (certainly no friend of Anna) would later describe her as "surrounded by wealthy connections."<sup>21</sup>

Giles, John W., and Thomas prospered modestly, while Littleton undertook another migration to Maysville, the home of an uncle, Colonel Devall Payne. Giles acquired more land while serving as a deputy sheriff, an election clerk, and a militia officer. John W. opened a tavern and boarding house in 1817 and also served as a deputy and an election clerk. Both Thomas and Littleton served in the War of 1812, the former as a sergeant in Sharp's regiment.<sup>22</sup> Then the brothers began to die. The first to go was Thomas in late 1818 or early 1819. Giles soon followed and then John W. in 1821. Only Anna's mother and her younger brother Peyton remained in the county.<sup>23</sup>

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brother-in-law Pierce Baylay. For some reason this land was not taken up by the Cookes when they arrived in Kentucky. See *ibid.*, 162; Warren Co., Ky. Index of Taxpayers, 1797-1810 (n.p., n.d.), n.p. These Warren County records are unpublished; the originals are at the Warren County Courthouse in Bowling Green. Copies are available at the Western Kentucky University Library, Kentucky Building, Bowling Green, Kentucky. Dr. Sharp could not quite determine Anna's age; see *Vindication*, 12, 13, 23.

21 Warren County, Ky. Index of Taxpayers, 1797-1810; Sharp, *Vindication*, 9. Dr. Sharp also described Anna's family as being "among the most respectable in that section of the country." See *ibid.*, 13. Anna was quoted in the *Frankfort Commentator*, 15 July 1826, as claiming that she "came of as good a family as any in Virginia." "I moved," she recalled, "in the first circles of society."

22 Jillson, *Land Grants*, 289; Circuit Court, for the County of Warren Order Book, Sept. 3, 1804 to May 10, 1806, pp. 234, 236, 287; Warren County, Kentucky Order Book E From January 2, 1815 to February 3, 1824, pp. 85, 231; Order Book "D" Warren County from 1812-1815, p. 26; Military Record of Solomon P. Sharp, National Archives.

23 Warren County, Kentucky Order Book E From January 2, 1815 to February 3, 1824, pp. 136-37; Wills and Inventories, Warren County, Ky . . . , Volume I, 184; Wills and Inventories, Warren County Ky . . . , Volume II, 278-79, 396, 398, 440-43. A sale of John W. Cooke's property was held 7 January 1822. Anna made several small purchases and paid \$2,000 for four of John W.'s slaves. G. Glen Clift, *The "Corn Stalk" Militia of Kentucky, 1792-1811* (Frankfort, 1957), 167.

During this time of death and bereavement Anna incurred public obloquy by conceiving and giving birth to an illegitimate child. She was brought to bed at Forest Home, Peyton Cooke's farm fifteen miles northeast of Bowling Green in May or June, 1820. To add to Anna's sorrow the baby was stillborn. She had named Sharp as the father. He denied paternity. Because of its dark color rumors soon circulated that the baby was a mulatto. Anna's response to this avalanche of gossip and woe was to withdraw with her mother to a small farm in neighboring Simpson County. She named her new home, appropriately, Retirement.<sup>24</sup>

By 1820 Sharp had come a long way from his hardscrabble origins. At thirty-three, only fourteen years after beginning his legal career, he had an established and lucrative practice that extended far beyond Warren County. Four terms in the legislature and two terms in Congress had given Sharp a formidable political base. He owned several thousand acres of land, a house in Bowling Green, and thirteen slaves. He had married well. His bride Eliza came from a family with many more pretensions to gentility than Sharp's family. The colonel was upwardly mobile, both socially and politically.

Anna's unseasonable pregnancy threatened this laboriously constructed and promising career. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that he admitted fathering Anna's child. Such an untimely concession would have unpredictable but certainly deleterious consequences for his political future. And what would be the effect upon his marriage? He had, after all, been married less than a year when Anna asserted his responsibility for her child. Such a scandal obviously threatened any emotional intimacy that had been established with Eliza. A break with her would damage the social position he had achieved in significant part through his marriage. Everything considered, it surely must have seemed better to Sharp to

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24 Sharp, *Vindication*, 18, 27, 81-83; Beauchamp, *Confession*, 26, 34, 36. There is a tombstone with the partially obliterated date May 18\_\_ and the name "Peytie" inscribed upon it in the Peyton Cooke graveyard near Oakland, Kentucky. It is possible that this is the stone marking the grave of Anna's child, although Dr. Sharp claimed that she gave birth in June; see *Vindication*, 18. This property is now owed by Colonel and Mrs. Robert Spiller and has been splendidly restored.



deny paternity vigorously and end the whole distressing affair as quickly and quietly as possible.

Any damage control practiced by the colonel and Dr. Sharp could count on help from Anna. Whatever the truth of the allegations gathered by Dr. Sharp, Anna's reputation as a freethinker, a reader of romantic fiction, and a libertine was enough to convince many people that she was slandering the colonel.<sup>25</sup> Evidently Anna had few friends, even in her own family. True, her mother never renounced her and her brother Peyton permitted her to give birth at his farm. But that was all. Neither Peyton, Giles, John W., or Littleton seems to have thought her virtue worth defending. They appear to have believed that there was no question of honor involved in Anna's disgrace, which plainly implied that they thought Anna bereft of honor. Dr. Sharp claimed that the Cookes had employed the colonel to represent them in legal matters even after Anna's claims had become public.

At least on the surface Sharp came through the incident unscathed. Anna, spurned and humiliated, had left the field. In 1821 Sharp again entered politics, this time as a candidate for the state senate from Warren County. Apparently he was confident that the rumors of paternity attached to his name as a consequence of Anna's pregnancy and birth had not substantially damaged his reputation.

Anna had become his most formidable enemy, and she would eventually destroy him. But there were other adversaries who presented more immediate threats. The most menacing in Bowling Green was John Upshaw Waring. Like Sharp he was a lawyer and land speculator, but unlike Sharp he was also a killer. In the judgment of Dr. Sharp, Waring was "one of the most malignant and dangerous men that ever lived," an opinion widely shared by other Kentuckians.

The two lawyers had probably disagreed over the language in one or more of the state's incredibly complex land laws. Whatever the nature of the quarrel, Waring was sufficiently angered to send the

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25 Solomon P. Sharp, Warren County, Kentucky, Federal Census of 1820; Sharp, *Vindication*, 7-17, 22, 31, 32; Gorin, *Barren County*, 57, 106, 136, 137.

colonel and Dr. Sharp two threatening letters, one of which the latter quoted in his *Vindication*. Waring also struck at Sharp by writing and publishing a handbill that appeared 8 June 1821, attacking his character, charging him with land fraud, and reviving the story that he was the father of Anna's child.

Five days after the handbill appeared, Sharp resigned from the senatorial race to join the administration of Governor John Adair as attorney general. According to his brother, Sharp had agreed to Adair's offer before the handbill appeared. Mrs. Sharp's desire to be nearer her mother also may have influenced his decision.<sup>26</sup>

Sharp journeyed to Frankfort in September to be present at a session of the Court of Appeals. He planned to remain there until his confirmation hearings. The next month Dr. Sharp brought his brother's family to the capitol to join him. On 24 October 1821 Sharp was officially nominated as attorney general and hearings on the nomination began. They continued for six days. The rumor of the colonel's adultery was again brought up, probably by Waring. The committee pondered the charge, apparently rejected it as untrue or irrelevant, and voted unanimously for Sharp's confirmation of 30 October.

By accepting Adair's offer Sharp had positioned himself in an office of considerable influence, much nearer the center of power in Kentucky than Bowling Green. He had also removed himself and his family from that section of the state in which the scandal concerning Anna's baby was likely to damage his marriage and career the most.

Sharp, moreover, was looking ahead. The Kentucky Court of Appeals was too far away for many of the state's lawyers, who would find the trip to Frankfort and the expenses incidental to the journey onerous. If, however, Sharp were to enter private practice there after his stint as attorney general, he would undoubtedly attract many

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26 Sharp, *Vindication*, 18-22, 47; *Argus*, 22 March 1826, [3]. On 1 June Waring wrote Sharp that he would "corporally punish" both him and Dr. Sharp for remarks they had allegedly made about him. He warned them not to use his name again. See Sharp, *Vindication*, 20. L.F. Johnson abundantly confirms Dr. Sharp's negative view of Waring in *Tragedies and Trials*, 58-67; Beauchamp, *Confession*, 24-26.

clients, including other lawyers, who would employ his talents to represent their clients before the Court of Appeals for a percentage of the fee.<sup>27</sup>

Colonel Sharp's domestic and professional success seemed assured. His political future, while less certain, must also have appeared bright. By aligning himself with the Relief faction, he had taken a stand that would appeal to the vast majority of Kentuckians. The politics of the common man was the wave of the future, and Sharp was admirably positioned to ride the crest.

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27 Sharp, *Vindication*, 5, 6, 7, 9, 21; Kirwan, *Crittenden*, 37; *Argus*, 1 November 1821, [3] and 8 November 1821, [3].