The Life and Death of Major Thomas Biddle

The death of Major Biddle, who died in a duel at St. Louis in 1831, evoked recollections of his War of 1812 services. Paymaster General of the Army, Colonel Nathan Towson, who had been in the same corps with Biddle, stated that “for strict and uncompromising integrity, a high sense of honor and elevated sentiments, I have never known his superior and seldom his equal. His unfortunate defect of vision [Biddle was nearsighted] was calculated to make the impression that he was cold and reserved, but those who knew him intimately can testify that he united a gentle and kind disposition with a warm and generous heart. I know of no individual who had the esteem and confidence of his brother officers in a higher degree than Maj. Biddle.”

“I have the mournful satisfaction to say,” wrote General Edmund P. Gaines, “that I witnessed the conduct of Major Thomas Biddle (then a Captain of Artillery) in the principal Battle at Fort Erie... in which Biddle’s battery, like that of Towson on the left and that of our lamented Williams on the right, exhibited constant evidence of vigilant preparation and skilfull action. He kept it brilliantly lighted up. . . . His conduct as witnessed by me every day and night for more than three weeks in the cannonade and bombardment at Fort Erie proved him to be an officer of great gallantry. . . .”

“In Major Biddle,” observed General Winfield Scott, “I have lost a most valued & valuable friend. In a selfish point of view, I am the greatest sufferer perhaps, among his friends. He served principally

1 Gen. Towson to Charles Biddle, Jr., Oct. 3, 1831, Andalusia Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP). Unless otherwise stated, all citations to manuscripts are from this recently discovered mass of Biddle papers. A brief sketch of Thomas Biddle appears in Henry Simpson, The Lives of Eminent Philadelphians Now Deceased (Philadelphia, 1859), 77-80. This was evidently contributed by the Major’s nephew, Col. Charles J. Biddle.
in my regiment & with my brigade, & I always relied on him to give, if not a connected history of the campaign of 1814, at least some important facts illustrative of its principal events. To some of those facts he was my principal witness."}

Expressions of regret and praise for Major Biddle’s character from his friends may have done something to assuage the grief which overwhelmed his widow and sorely afflicted the Major’s large family in Philadelphia, where he was born on November 21, 1790. Little is known of his early years other than his frequent acknowledgment of his debt to his eldest brother, William S. Biddle, for his youthful guidance. It is probable that he attended the preparatory schools of the University of Pennsylvania. Five of his brothers are known to have done so, a lapse in the University’s records clouding the issue as regards Thomas.

When the probability of a war with England arose, Thomas Biddle asked his father Charles for permission to join the Army. With his father’s reluctant consent, and perhaps through his not inconsiderable political influence, the twenty-one-year-old Thomas obtained a commission as Captain of Infantry on April 9, 1812. He established his headquarters at Bristol, recruited a company, and a month or so later marched it to Plattsburg, New York. In July he was transferred to the Artillery.

Thomas Biddle’s military services have been suggested in the opening paragraphs and it is not the purpose here to go into detail about them. Suffice it to say that he distinguished himself, was twice wounded, was mentioned in dispatches, promoted, and retained in the peacetime establishment at the war’s end. In January 1815 he returned to Philadelphia, where for a few years he was in command of Fort Mifflin, below the city on the Delaware. He jaunted to and from the Fort in his horse and gig, joined the Junior Quoit Club, recruited for the artillery, presided over a court martial at Pittsburgh in September 1817, and, between March 5 and April 22, 1818, sat for

---

4 Autobiography of Charles Biddle (Philadelphia, 1883), 335, 347; Thomas Biddle to Nicholas Biddle, May 11, 19, 1812, Wainwright Coll., II, 9, 10, HSP; William S. Biddle to Thomas Biddle, May 4, June 25, 1812.
5 Thomas Biddle Receipt Book Commencing June 26, 1816; Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography (PMHB), XIII (1889), 57.
his portrait, which was painted in a large size, 36 x 29 inches, by Thomas Sully for a price of $150. This dramatic martial canvas is in the collection of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.\(^6\)

Biddle’s command at Fort Mifflin was twice interrupted. In 1816 he went on an exploration of Illinois with Major Stephen H. Long,\(^7\) and in 1818 he obtained orders to join General Andrew Jackson’s expedition against the Seminole Indians. His passage from Philadelphia to Savannah having alone consumed forty days, Biddle arrived in Florida after the campaign was virtually over and was bitterly disappointed as he would have commanded the artillery which played a major role. Making Jackson’s acquaintance, he found him to be “a man of such astonishing promptitude & vigor that he has accomplished in a few days what any other man under the canopy of Heaven would have been months in performing. He is certainly the most singular character in existence, a man sui generis, there is no other like him.” His admiration for Jackson’s military ability was unstinted, but he doubted the General’s political wisdom: “His hanging the two Englishmen at St. Marks I think a most unjustifiable act & one likely to involve us in difficulty & disgrace.”\(^8\)

His duty in the Philadelphia area coming to an end, on March 19, 1819, the Major wrote his brother Nicholas from Fort Mifflin: “I shall leave here tomorrow for Pittsburgh. I wish if you think of it you would in September or August next write me a letter to St. Louis.”\(^9\) The easterner had reached a watershed in his career; henceforth his life was to be in the West.

Biddle had been attached to Major Long’s scientific expedition westward to the Rocky Mountains. Well equipped and furnished with Philadelphia specialists in botany, zoology and geology, as well as an assistant naturalist to preserve specimens and a landscape painter, Long’s mission was to explore the Mississippi, the Missouri, and their navigable tributaries, and to make a topographical de-

---

\(^6\) Edward Biddle and Mantle Fielding, *The Life and Works of Thomas Sully* (Philadelphia, 1921), 101. A replica of this portrait, painted in 1832 for the Major’s sister Ann, is at the National Gallery of Art. The original was evidently painted for the Major’s father.


\(^8\) Thomas Biddle to Nicholas Biddle from Fort Scott, E. Florida, June 8, 1818.

\(^9\) Wainwright Coll., III, 30.
scription of the country. Major Biddle's duty was to keep a journal recording all transactions, describing the manners and customs of the natives, and to cover all subjects except those of the naturalists. Early in April Long's personnel gathered at Pittsburgh, where Biddle and his servant boarded the steamboat U. S. Western Engineer. Unfortunately, he left little personal record of what must have been an adventurous excursion during which he went far up the Missouri River into Indian territory. He probably remained with the expedition until October, when Major Long left it to return down the Missouri in a canoe, eastward bound for Washington and Philadelphia.¹⁰

Several glimpses of Biddle's westward journey have survived. On May 11, 1819, he wrote from Cincinnati to Nicholas: "After overcoming various difficulties at Pittsburgh we left there on the 6th inst. Our boat is not propelled with the velocity we expected & is too slow to overcome the rapid current of the Missouri. We have halted here (500 miles from Pittsburgh) to have our machinery reorganized." The Major blamed Major Long for its faulty construction. "Long is a good mathematician, amiable & very industrious, but he is too much of a theorist, knows nothing of men, his judgment I would not give a fig for & he is no military man." Nearly a month passed before the expedition reached St. Louis, from where the Major on June 9 again wrote Nicholas Biddle: "We arrived here yesterday & will attempt in a few days to ascend the Missouri. I doubt much the practicability of any steamboat being able to ascend to the Falls & I question still more the policy of establishing posts in those remote quarters."¹¹

In April 1820 Biddle paid a call on President Monroe, who was a close friend of his brother Nicholas. His visit to Washington must have been prompted by personal considerations, for the Army was about to suffer a further reduction in strength. At all events, on August 7, 1820, Major Biddle accepted the office of Army Paymaster and Pension Agent at St. Louis, where he was to reside for the rest

¹⁰ Edwin James, Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains (London, 1823), 1, 3, 4, 152. Another publication incorrectly identifies Maj. John Biddle as journalist of the expedition. See Harlin M. Fuller and LeRoy R. Hafen, The Journal of Captain John R. Bell (Glendale, Calif., 1957), 32.

¹¹ Nicholas Biddle Papers, Supplementary Volume 5, #s 1375, 1383, Library of Congress.
of his life. His first impressions of his new home were generally favorable: "Missouri will become a considerable state there is much fine land in it... & is a depot for all the fur trade in the U. S.... St. Louis is a clever place enough. There is a good society of gentlemen, not polished men exactly but of good understanding & of the most warm friendly feelings." He noted that Missouri's first legislature was in session.12

Biddle's duties, primarily paying the troops at distant posts, took him away from St. Louis for months at a time. Of a visit to the Falls of St. Anthony on the Upper Mississippi in the summer of 1822, he wrote: "This place is 40 days journey from St. Louis, at least I was that length of time in ascending; as the distance is but 900 miles you may readily imagine how tediously my boat must have moved." And again: "for the last six months I have been engaged in incessant & laborious travel on the Western waters, great part of the time in an open canoe exposed day and night to the weather, notwithstanding which I have suffered but little from sickness."13

Thus, year after year, Major Biddle was on the move. His annual visits to the Falls of St. Anthony were shortened by improved steamboat transportation to a fourteen-day round trip.14 Duties also took him to New Orleans, Louisville, Cincinnati, Detroit and elsewhere. The pressure of these travels is suggested in a July 1825 letter: "I leave tomorrow for the Upper Mississippi as well to pay the troops as to attend to some Indian business at Prairie des chiens. I will not return until September & in October I shall be compelled to leave home again for New Orleans."15 "The journeys I am required to undertake," he lamented, for he otherwise longed to visit Philadelphia, "are so laborious that I feel no inclination to leave home voluntarily."16 They were not, however, uneventful. "I returned from the Upper Mississippi 11 days since," he wrote his brother William on August 4, 1824. "I was watched on Lake Pepen by a war party of Chippewas & escaped by crossing the river to encamp. Four men who were following me were killed by them the next day."

12 Thomas Biddle to Nicholas Biddle, Nov. 21, 1820, Nicholas Biddle Papers, Supplementary Volume 5, #1436, Library of Congress.
13 Thomas Biddle to William S. Biddle, July 15, Sept. 13, 1822.
14 Thomas Biddle to William S. Biddle, Jan. 8, 1830.
15 Thomas Biddle to William S. Biddle, July 4, 1825.
16 Thomas Biddle to William S. Biddle, Sept. 11, 1826.
Major Biddle was nor altogether happy with life in the West. He bore it for financial reasons since his means were ample for a residence in St. Louis but would have been insufficient, at least until his final years, for the seaboard. He clung to the hope that eventually he would return to Philadelphia. To his mother he wrote: “The Western country is at best but a miserable exile to a man who has seen anything better.” And, in discouraged vein, to his brother: “I am struggling with a fierce & discordant population & have but little expectation of ever visiting Philada. I am growing too uncouth to trust myself among men who justly value politeness, attainment & learning.”

Instead of an urbane life in the cultured city of his birth, he consoled himself with collecting a library of the classics, poetry, reference works, and particularly books on political economy. He read widely in American state papers, laws of the United States, and subscribed to Philadelphia newspapers and the best quarterlies. The political bent of his reading is indicated in a letter to his brother asking him to select “books illustrative of the history & principles of the present Constitution & proceedings under it, such as debates in the Convention, Federalist (I have lost the copy I had), Gales Register of Debates, etc.”

In 1823, Major Biddle laconically announced his engagement to Ann Mullanphy, writing to his brother William in August, “I engaged in March last to marry the daughter [there were six other daughters and a son] of a Mr. Mullanphy who lives in a village [Florissant] adjoining this. She is a healthy industrious, amiable Kentucky woman, not entirely uneducated, but she has seen but little of the world & has the manners of one unused to Society. I have no brilliant expectations from this connection, but consider it sufficiently satisfactory for a man who will probably seldom go beyond the west bank of the Mississippi.” To this William replied: “We have a high opinion of the lady’s amiable & excellent qualities, tho you have not followed the usual method of lovers in extravagant encomiums.”

17 Thomas Biddle to Mrs. Charles Biddle, Apr. 4, 1823, and to William S. Biddle, Oct. 24, 1824.
18 Thomas Biddle to William S. Biddle, Jan. 14, 1829.
19 Thomas Biddle to William S. Biddle, Aug. 22, 1823, William S. Biddle to Thomas Biddle, Sept. 22, 1823.
The couple were married on September 1, 1823. Although in subsequent letters the Major paid compliments to his wife—"She is a warm hearted woman, full of enthusiasm, and warm feelings, & one of the most disinterested beings that ever lived, but totally ignorant of the world & its manners," and "She is a very ardent warm hearted woman"—he could have said much more.\(^{20}\) Ann Mullanphy was the sixth child of John Mullanphy, an enterprising Irishman who came to America in 1792 and moved about considerably before finally settling in St. Louis. He has been termed the first millionaire west of the Mississippi River. Although Biddle wrote that Ann, who was born on August 23, 1800, in Frankfort, Kentucky, "has seen but little of this world," she had commenced her education in 1808 at the Ursuline convent in New Orleans, then resided with her family in Baltimore and for a time studied at Mme. Rivardi's Seminary in Philadelphia. In 1818 she went to France for several years to complete her education at the Convent of the Sacred Heart in Paris and perhaps elsewhere. She studied drawing under the best teachers in France. In 1821 she rejoined her father in St. Louis, her mother remaining in France. Ann wrote a good hand, and expressed herself sensibly. She played the piano well, knew some Italian, and was proficient in French. In her years of despair after her husband's death, she thought of retiring to a nunnery, but instead devoted herself to charity and to the wise handling of the large estate left to her by her father, valued in 1836 in excess of $300,000.\(^{21}\)

Prior to his marriage Major Biddle had been living in a small house which he was in the process of furnishing. When his father-in-law gave the Biddles a better house, the Major ordered a great deal of furniture from Philadelphia. In 1825 he wrote his brother Charles: "I have a good house here adjoining the town and a few acres of land under cultivation, some negroes (6) as servants, horses, etc. I have $17,800 in mortgages & stocks in William's hands, $3,200 in mort-

\(^{20}\) Thomas Biddle to William S. Biddle, Oct. 27, 1823, and to Mrs. John G. Biddle, Aug. 11, 1826, Wainwright Coll., IV, 37.

\(^{21}\) Thomas Biddle to Commodore James Biddle, Feb. 13, 1831, Nicholas Biddle Papers, Supplemental Volume 6, #1889; Mrs. Thomas Biddle to Commodore Biddle, Mar. 4, 1833, June 14, 1836, James Biddle Papers, VII, at Andalusia. For data on the Mullanphy family, I acknowledge the help of Mrs. Francis P. Hardaway of Saint Louis. See also *The Star* (New York), Oct. 16, 1886.
gages here. My pay amounts to about $1,800 dollars. ... I owe no man in the world a cent. I besides own one or two little tracts of land and furnishing my house has been a considerable source of expence to me.”

Biddle was not at first on close terms with his father-in-law, whom he seldom saw. Although he procured Mullanphy a brewer from Philadelphia, he declined Mullanphy’s request to become involved with him in his brewery. Wrote the Major, “He is a man of considerable property & very attentive to his own concerns, but singular in many things, though very honest & upright. He has English ideas on the subject of primogeniture & will leave most of his estate to his son, who is now at a college in England.”

As a married man, Biddle was becoming more resigned to life in the West. Of his place at St. Louis he wrote his sister in 1826: “It is a pretty retired spot & as the society here is not very attractive we spend most of our time at home. With the assistance of my wife I have become a tolerable French scholar.” Although no servants were to be had but slaves, and they were both provoking & expensive (a pair of good slaves cost about $750), costs otherwise were low in St. Louis—beef could be had at one and a half cents a pound, pork at two cents, poultry was cheap and wild fowl cheaper. Biddle bought a wild turkey for twelve and a half cents, and venison at one and a half cents a pound. Inexpensive groceries were supplied from New Orleans. On the debit side was a deplorable deficiency of schools at St. Louis (a matter of no immediate concern for the Biddies as they had no children). As a silver lining, in 1826 a very pretty Episcopal church was under construction, “tho I confess my zeal has carried me no further than to contribute to the building.” Despite his wife’s Catholicism, the Major still held to the Episcopal faith of his parents.

His increasing prosperity stemmed mainly from his enterprise in business and his leadership in the community. He was instrumental in the establishment of a branch of the Bank of the United States at St. Louis and in the founding of the city’s first fire insurance

22 Thomas Biddle to Charles Biddle, Sept. 30, 1825, Wainwright Coll., IV, 65.
23 Ibid.
24 Thomas Biddle to Mrs. John G. Biddle, Aug. 11, 1826, Wainwright Coll., IV, 37.
25 Thomas Biddle to Charles Biddle, Dec. 13, 1826, ibid, 70.
company. As early as 1822 he had taken an interest in lead, having located a lead mine in Indian country, but he did not venture into that industry at that time. Later, with the lead business rapidly increasing in profitability, he began to invest rather heavily in it. One of his shipments of lead in 1829 to a firm of Philadelphia merchants was valued at $7,000. On his death in 1831 the Major had done so well that the worth of his property was estimated at $80,000. A few months before his duel the Major commented on how fortunate he had been in pecuniary affairs: "My property here has much enhanced & I have for this country a handsome revenue."

Encouraged by his growing fortune, Biddle decided to build a suburban house, about 20 x 35 feet, and also a town house of the same dimensions. His plans were slowed when architectural drawings by William Strickland, sent to Biddle from Philadelphia, proved unsatisfactory. "What he has sent me are two commonplace front views of houses such as a schoolboy could copy out of any book on architecture." By early 1831 at least one new house for him was under construction, and for it he ordered from Philadelphia, via New Orleans, a vast amount of new furniture, including such items as twenty-four mahogany chairs and much silver and glass. The house was to have a large hall in which the Major intended to hang portraits "of nearest relatives & friends." With his home nearing completion and its furnishings soon to arrive, the Major informed his brother on August 24, 1831, that he was going to make a trip to Green Bay in about a month. Unfortunately, none of his expectations were to be fulfilled. He did not live to occupy his house nor to enjoy its rich adornments. Five days later he was dead, the cause of his death stemming from his inflexible code of honor and his involvement in politics.

Like his father and his brothers, all of whom, save Commodore James Biddle, and Edward who died young at sea, held elective or appointive offices—two of them as congressman—Major Biddle felt
a strong affinity for politics. After he had been established in St.
Louis for some years, he wrote his brother William that while he
had not taken an active part, and had remained neutral from parties
and disputes, his course had been to behave civilly and courteously
to everyone and to take every opportunity of making himself favor-
ably known to the people. Later he confided to William: "It is
sometimes intimated to me that I might be successful in a political
career." In 1826, in yet another letter to William (of June 27), he
mentioned that he had encouraged a campaign on his behalf to run
for Congress, but had then declined that course.

Ultimately, Biddle's failure as a politician lay in his opposition
to Andrew Jackson. "I have a great personal friendship & military
admiration of General Jackson," he observed, "but I should fear he
would make an unsafe President. I have no apprehensions of his
overturning the government by military violence, his intentions
would be pure & his patriotism honest, but his modes of thinking &
acting have been too rapid & desultory to fit him to decide upon the
profound & intricate subjects involved in the administration of a
great government." By the end of the year, when he returned from
Jefferson City, Missouri's seat of government, Biddle had made his
position clear in entirely differing with Senator Thomas Hart Benton
on the subject of the presidential election. He was rapidly gaining
enemies for his anti-Jackson stand. "I go tomorrow to Jefferson
City," he wrote in the election year of 1828, "to assist in forming
an electoral ticket for our state. I am not perhaps on the sunny side
of the hedge, but I think I am on the right one."

Jackson’s victory led Biddle to comment, "I have breasted the
almost unanimous opinion of this state & sacrificed at least for a
time any political part I might have intended to take." Nevertheless,
his political ambitions did not cool. His hopes to run for Congress
disappointed in 1828, in 1830 he thought there was a chance he
might be elected Senator: "I found however my political opponents
in the majority & I was not nominated. I go in opposition to Genl.
Jackson with what is called the Clay party." And he wrote to the

31 Thomas Biddle to William S. Biddle, Jan. 11, Sept. 30, 1825.
32 Thomas Biddle to William S. Biddle, Oct. 20, Dec. 9, 1826, Nov. 5, 1827.
33 Thomas Biddle to William S. Biddle, Feb. 28, 1828.
34 Thomas Biddle to William S. Biddle, Nov. 24, 1828.
Commodore: "I have mingled somewhat in politics & if I had been in favor of Genl. Jackson I could last fall have been elected to the U. S. Senate, as it was I could get but 26 votes, 34 were necessary. ... I think I shall not again engage in political matters." Meanwhile, his disapprobation of Jackson became ever more confirmed. He was critical of the selections for the Cabinet, and he resented the President's hostility to the Bank of the United States. Not only was the Major's brother Nicholas president of the Bank, but the Major was one of those originally named to be directors of its St. Louis branch. Indeed, prominent citizens of the town had urged on Nicholas Biddle Thomas' name as president of the branch, but Nicholas avoided that apparent nepotism.

Although the Major was thinking of disengaging himself from political matters, he could not refrain from commenting on them. The strength of his anti-Jackson feelings were expressed in a letter of January 22, 1831, to his brother William.

It appears to be now the settled policy of Mr. Van Buren & Gen. Jackson to sustain the popularity of the administration by surrendering to the states all the power of the General Government that any one of them may consider inconvenient or obnoxious in its immediate operation. The prognostic in that admirable book you sent me, the Federalist, that demagogues & scoundrels would avail themselves of the popularity of state rights to aggrandize themselves & run the country, is I apprehend soon to be accomplished. But I will not afflict you with my politics.

If Major Biddle was strongly against Jackson, Spencer D. Pettis was all for the President. Born in Virginia in 1802, and thus twelve years younger than the Major, he was admitted to the Missouri bar about 1824. After holding several political offices, he was elected to Congress in 1829. In 1831 he was running for re-election on the Jacksonian ticket and meeting with some opposition in his own party. To a friend he complained: "You know the course I have pursued. That I have from the beginning supported our party with all my might & main. I have risked every thing. I have been abused & vilified by the other party. I have done all in my power to support

---

35 Thomas Biddle to William S. Biddle, Jan. 8, 1830; Thomas Biddle to Commodore Biddle, Feb. 13, 1831, loc. cit.
the Administration and what is my reward? An effort among a few of my friends to turn me out." 36

The quarrel between Biddle and Pettis, who were politically poles apart, arose out of the stormiest issue of the day, the rechartering of the Bank of the United States, to which Jackson was opposed. Believing Pettis incompetent to serve as a congressman, Biddle attacked him in the April 23, 1831, issue of the *St. Louis Times* in a letter signed "Missouri." It was standard practice in those days to use pseudonyms for communications to newspapers. Unfortunately, no copy of that issue appears to have survived, but a writer in 1877 termed Biddle's letter a severe ridicule in which the Major compared Pettis to "a bowl of skimmed milk" and "a plate of dried herrings." When Pettis saw this letter, Biddle being far up the Mississippi, he was not amused. He took it seriously. Learning the identity of the writer, he wrote a reply, not contesting that what Biddle had said about him might be true, but inquiring "had Major Biddle ever given any evidence to the world of his manhood?" 37 This appeared to be a rather foolish attack on Biddle's courage. Pettis was evidently rather a prickly individual. A duel between him and a Pennsylvania congressman had only recently been prevented. 38 Major Biddle, too, had a history. In 1823 he had been obliged to challenge "a notorious scoundrel who had spoken disrespectfully of me." When this "scoundrel" approached "the ground his courage evaporated & he made me ample apology." 39

Upon his return to St. Louis Biddle's reaction to Pettis' activities was one of surprise and anger. Pettis had made Biddle's newspaper letter "a personal matter, had demanded my name, threatened to call me out, and declared his determination to fight me, and published a piece of abuse against me." Biddle demanded that Pettis make good his threat and, on receiving no reply, published the following "card":

During my absence from the state, Mr. Pettis demanded my name, threatened to call me out, practised his pistols etc. I am no fighting man,

36 Pettis to Col. D. Dunklin, May 10, 1831, Society Coll., HSP.
37 C. R. Barns, *The Commonwealth of Missouri* (St. Louis, 1877), 489. Citation courtesy of Catherine Barber of the Missouri Historical Society.
39 Thomas Biddle to William S. Biddle, Aug. 22, 1823.
but I balk no man who comes at me in that attitude. I now call upon Mr. Pettis to redeem his promises and execute his threats or he must be stript of his belligerant plumage. 40

Pettis then, in Biddle's words, "published a statement of the most billingsgate abuse against me, & I ceased to expect that he would act toward me as a man of honor." Pettis' abuse Biddle further characterized as "intolerable provocations I have received beyond the endurance of human nature." 41 What had Pettis done that was so intolerable?

General William S. Harney's recollections of the duel appear to provide the answer. In his old age the General frequently discussed the event with a newspaperman who published an article entitled "A famous Missouri Duel: The Truth about the Pettis-Biddle Fight," in the October 19, 1886, issue of a New York paper, The Star. While some of Harney's recollections were either incorrect or else garbled by the journalist, in the main they appear to be sound.

There was every reason why General Harney should have known all the details about the duel. He not only lived many years in St. Louis but in 1833 he married Major Biddle's sister-in-law, Mary Mullanphy. According to him, as set down in The Star, "Mr. Pettis besides being a politician was a newspaper man, and, having taken up the 'popular' side, amused himself with constant attacks on Major Biddle. . . . Mr. Pettis finding his shafts falling short, then published a disgusting article on the fact that Mrs. Biddle had had no children, and going into speculations on the cause." Here then was a more explicit version of Pettis' inquiry, "had Major Biddle ever given any evidence to the world of his manhood?"

Harney reported that as soon as Biddle read the article he sought out its author. What he did is most graphically told in Biddle's letter to his brother William of July 13, 1831.

After various vain efforts to bring a certain Mr. Pettis here to an honorable meeting, I found it necessary to repel his abuse by a personal chastisement & two days ago I went therefore to his room in the tavern, before he was up with a cowhide in my hand & a pistol in my pocket, called to him

40 This and other similar quotes are taken from undated clippings from the St. Louis newspaper in the Andalusia Papers.
41 Thomas Biddle to William S. Biddle, July 23, 1831.
to get up, threw the clothes off him & commenced chastising him. He exclaimed what strike a man in his bed, & I then desisted & permitted him to go for his sword cane. He came at me with it. I then for the first time drew my pistol, presented it at him, rushed upon, took away his sword, bent it nearly double that it might be useless, & continued to chastise him until his cries brought the tavern keeper & his boarders.

He has published a statement in which he makes it out that I wanted to kill him in his sleep, that he bent his sword in plunging it against me & that I had on armour etc, etc, an assassin & murder[er].

Immediately after the attack, Pettis went to a magistrate and had Biddle bound over to keep the peace. The scene between the two men in the magistrate’s office is told variously, one account having Pettis pulling out a gun and attempting to shoot Biddle. Pettis was quoted as saying that he would have “shot Mr. Biddle in the office of justice but that he could not cock his pistol.”

Both men then left town, Pettis to conclude his successful electioneering which found him returned to Congress by a large majority, Biddle to pay off the troops in the upper country. They returned to St. Louis about the same time, Pettis taking up residence with Lieutenant Martin Thomas, “a gentleman of experience in dueling [who] taught Pettis how to shoot.” In retrospect there were many who felt the duel would never have taken place had it not been for the evil genius of Thomas, a personal enemy of Biddle’s and an officer who that very year had been dismissed from the service. He is said to have urged the duel on Pettis. The necessity for the fight had been eliminated by Pettis’ violation of the code of the gentleman in such affairs by resorting to law and having Biddle enjoined to keep the peace.

As Major Richard Graham, Biddle’s closest friend and brother-in-law, feared, it was Lieutenant Thomas who brought Pettis’ challenge to the Major’s house. Graham intercepted Thomas and received the challenge in order to prevent Thomas from entering the house, for had he done so Biddle, who despised the man, would have booted him out.

42 For a varient view of the scene in the magistrate’s office see Barns, 490-491.
43 Ibid., 490.
44 In defense of Pettis it has been argued that he took this legal action to forestall a duel. Were he killed before the election his seat in Congress would have gone to the Clay faction.
Biddle, as General Harney indicated, had no desire to fight Pettis. He believed that his record showed he was afraid of no man, but that he could not meet on equal terms such a person as Pettis. Had he thought him a gentleman he would never have struck him with a whip. Duelling was for equals, or at least honorable men. Initially, Biddle’s stand was that he would decline receiving a challenge from such a person. But if Pettis had an evil genius in Thomas, urging him on to the challenge, Biddle had one in his father-in-law. John Mullanphy, described by General Harney as “a hot headed, intensely radical man,” insisted that Biddle could not afford to decline accepting the challenge. Under this pressure, added to the intense public excitement aroused by the affair, the Major was forced to set aside his better judgment. Deeply depressed, Biddle forebore for a time to tell his wife, who was ill, about the forthcoming duel. He was convinced that he was going to be killed.

Biddle wrote a brief new will in the early hours of the day of the duel, August 26. In his will the Major left everything to his wife, and requested her to present to each of his brothers and sisters, of whom there were eight, and to his sisters-in-law, Mary and Eliza Mullanphy, who were living with the Biddies, “a silver vase or cup as a memorial of my affection.”

About 4 P.M. on August 26 the two parties met on Bloody Island opposite the upper part of the city. Major John O’Fallon was Biddle’s second and he was also accompanied by two other friends and a surgeon. The Major as the challenged party had the right to name the terms, and, after attempting to hit a mark at nine feet without adequate success—it will be recalled that he was nearsighted—he determined on five feet. As the men took their positions, “Biddle declared, in the presence of God, he had no animosity against Mr. Pettis.” Pettis, who all along was reconciled to being killed made no reply. It is said that both men had already ordered their coffins. The duelists stood back to back separated by a scant five feet. Opposite the scene, the banks of the river were thronged with people gathered to witness the event. With the word “wheel and fire” the

45 Hyde and Conrad, Encyclopedia of the History of St. Louis (1899). Citation courtesy of Mrs. Francis P. Hardaway.

46 The will was actually dated August 25, but several evidences indicate that the hour of midnight had passed.
duellists spun around, arms extended, pistols overlapping, and fired simultaneously. As Biddle’s bullet passed clear through Pettis, striking him in the abdomen, his friends rushed forward to prevent his fall. Biddle hit in the hip was on the ground. It is said that the two exchanged forgivingments before they were taken from the island. Pettis died the next day, his funeral long remembered as one of the largest St. Louis had known.

Major Biddle lingered for several days, suffering severely. On the morning of the 28th, when Colonel George Croghan, Inspector General of the Army, called on him, he seemed better and his physicians “who, the morning before were in despair, then spoke with confidence of his recovery.” The ball, which had entered a little above the hip bone, was conjectured to have lodged in the groin. This surmise proved to be correct, for when some years later Biddle’s remains were disinterred to be placed in another coffin the bullet was found lying immediately in the rear of the right groin.

Biddle’s seeming recovery was shortlived. He died the day after Colonel Croghan’s visit. “Shortly before he died,” wrote Major Graham, “he asked for pen & ink & got Doct Lane to write what he wished to say. It was this ‘I wish to be buried alongside of my wife in the Catholic burying ground in Florrisent on the hill side on the right of Mr. Mullanphy in the Catholic faith.’ Mr. Mullanphy mentioned to him that he intended to build a vault in the Catholic burying ground near St. Louis, & as he wished all his family buried there hoped he would accede to it, which he did & was accordingly buried in it. Owing to the tempestuousness of the day, the rain falling in torrents throughout, the military could not attend which I much regretted & the body could not be kept.”

The officers at Jefferson Barracks, however, held a formal meeting, passed resolutions of regret, and as a mark of respect for Biddle’s memory determined to “wear the usual badge of mourning for thirty days.”

47 The account of the duel is taken from undated newspaper clippings in the Andalusia Papers and from Maj. Graham’s letter to William S. Biddle of Aug. 31, 1831.
49 Barns, 491.
51 Resolutions signed by Gen. Atkinson, drawn up by a committee headed by Gen. Leavenworth.
The crushing blow suffered by the Mullanphy family as a result of the duel is mirrored in a letter John Mullanphy wrote to Nicholas Biddle with an apology for its incoherence.\textsuperscript{52}

Oh my god what dreadful news I have to communicate to you your good your worthy & noble Brother is no more, he died about six o’clock this morning of a wound he recd. in a duel with Mr. Pettis on friday last. Pettis was buried yesterday, the Ball Enter’d a little above the hip bone of the Major & could not be found, he died in full possession of his senses, oh good heavens what a loss such a man to his relations and it is the heaviest misfortune could to my family half of my fortune if it were lost would nothing to his loss, we are ruined he was our staff & support on every occasion.

Mullanphy’s son-in-law, Charles Chambers, married to Jane Mullanphy, throws further light on Major Biddle’s standing with the family.\textsuperscript{53}

Mr P was unfortunately for himself & others the meer tool of the Jackson party, for if left to himself, woud [sic] never seek satisfaction in the Manner he did. Such was the notoriety of the affair that the male population of St. Louis were all within hearing of the fatal shots which were so nearly together that few coud distinguish more than one report. It has been a most deplorable event for his poor Wife, whose health is in a most pre-carious state & it is with difficulty that her religious principles can prevent her from giving way to utter despair. . . . The individual loss to Ann is incalculable for he was a most exemplary husband, but it is also a loss to all the family as he was so much a man of business & his probity and dis-interestedness were so well known to Mr. Mullanphy that he had determined to place the entire of his affairs under his Direction & Control.

And Major Graham, another of John Mullanphy’s sons-in-law, grieved: “a more honorable, upright & chivalric man I have never known, indeed his exquisite sense of honor has been the cause of his untimely death.”

It seems apparent that the duel would never have taken place had not Pettis’ friends forced him into the challenge. According to Major Graham, “Major O’Fallon tells me that Mr. Thomas has

\textsuperscript{52} Undated letter in the Nicholas Biddle Papers at Andalusia.

\textsuperscript{53} Charles Chambers to his father, Sept. 27, 1831, Chambers Letter Book, citation courtesy of Mrs. Francis P. Hardaway.
expressed to him that the suspicions against him (Mr. Thomas) are unfounded with respect to his urging Mr. P. to fight, that he disclaimed it & would have done anything that was honorable to prevent it, but that Mr. P. was goaded on & that one day the persons concerned would be known—that it was forced upon him & begg’d Maj. O’Fallon not to ask him the names (the hypocrite).” Writing to William S. Biddle two days after the Major’s death, Graham further stated: “Mr. P. deferred challenging till after the election & then it became problematical whether he would submit to the disgrace of the cowhiding or to the contumely of the Jackson Party. Party feelings overpowered every other & advantage being taken of the great excitement prevailing by a few of Major Biddle’s personal enemies they argued Mr. P. on to the challenge. . . . Your brother never would have fought Mr. P. after he had resorted to the law, but public excitement & public feeling compelled him to accept the challenge.”

The complexity of the mixed motives of Major Biddle’s enemies included his role as a director of the St. Louis Branch of the Bank of the United States. John Mullanphy commented on that aspect: “his death is owing to his active vigilance in the Bank business at this place, it is within my knowledge that he must have saved at least 50,000 for this office there has been a party who were disappointed in their aim [?] & forced poor Pettis to fight, some of our Board always disclosed the proceedings at it.”

One of those responsible for Pettis’ challenging Biddle confessed his culpability in an undated, anonymous newspaper clipping: “The course—blind, rash and murderous—which I urged in this unfortunate affair, has left stings with me which nothing but religion can extract. I have had few moments of peace of mind since the death of my worthy friend.”

During the winter of 1831–1832, Thomas Biddle’s widow spent some months in Philadelphia, staying with his sister Mary. Before her return to St. Louis she requested Mary to see to the Major’s memorial gifts to his brothers and sisters and to the two Mullanphy girls. Mary went to Thomas Fletcher, the city’s outstanding maker

54 Mullanphy to Nicholas Biddle, loc. cit.
55 Mary Biddle, who married her cousin John G. Biddle, was herself a widow.
of ceremonial silver pieces, and by July Fletcher had created "10 silver cups richly chased with Dolphin handles etc @ $60—$600."  

Fourteen years later, following the death of Major Biddle's widow on January 10, 1846, her will was published in thirteen pages of fine print, in which she disposed of her estate. Among her many benefactions was a Widows' Asylum and an Orphans' Asylum to be built at Tenth and Biddle Streets in St. Louis. For the same location she set aside the sum of $8,000 for the purpose of removing the remains of her husband and herself and interring them in a consecrated lot, 80 by 125 feet, enclosed by a suitable wall or fence. Over the joint graves was to be erected a monument of the best materials. The tomb was designed by George I. Barnett and is ornamented with marble bas-relief portraits of the Major and his wife. The monument also bore the inscription "Pray for Thomas and Ann Biddle."  

Historical Society of Pennsylvania Nicholas B. Wainwright  

56 For an account of the memorial vases see Nicholas B. Wainwright, "Major Thomas Biddle's Silver Vases," The Magazine Antiques, January 1979.  
57 Barns, 491. In 1881 the tomb was moved to its present location, St. Louis' Calvary Cemetery. The author thanks Gail R. Guidry of the Missouri Historical Society for photographs of the tomb.