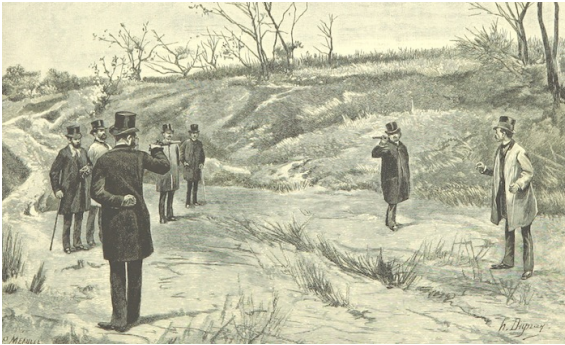


# Sticks and Stones Can Break My Bones, But Words Can Lead to Bullets



There was a time when words had consequences. Nearly 140 years ago, two competing Virginia newspapermen discovered this for themselves. Richard Beirne was the 28 year old editor of Richmond's newspaper, The State. It was widely known to be an arm of the Democratic Party. Their competitor, The Whig, was run by William C. Elam. Their war of words began in 1883 when Confederate hero Billy Mohone used Elam and The Whig to launch a new political party.

Beirne published an editorial highly critical of Mohone and insulting to any who followed him, calling them a "vicious, corrupt and degraded group." Elam responded in his paper the next day calling Beirne not only a liar but one who does so "deliberately, knowingly, maliciously, and with the inevitable cowardice that is always connected with insolent bravado."

Beirne took offense and through an intermediary sent a challenge to Elam which was accepted. News of the pending duel spread through the town and the mayor ordered both men to be arrested. But they were already in hiding. Their first attempt to settle their dispute was interrupted by an officer but the parties managed to escape. They agreed to meet again outside of Waynesboro.

This time, they were not dissuaded. Both men fired their

weapons at the count of two and missed. Their pistols were reloaded. The second time, Elam's shot went high but Beirne's bullet caught Elam in the inside of his right thigh. Both men were taken from the scene and were back to work at their respective papers within 10 days, each one publicly praising the courage of the other.

Theirs was the last formal duel fought in Virginia. My sister-in-law's 1st cousin, Waverly Ragland, served as Beirne's second for the first (interrupted) duel.

*Michael Ondrasik and Home Video Studio specialize in the preservation of family memories through the digitalization of film, videotapes, audio recordings, photos, negatives and slides. For more information, call 352-735-8550 or visit our [website](#). And be sure to watch our TEDxEustis talk at [https://youtu.be/uYlTTHp\\_C08](https://youtu.be/uYlTTHp_C08).*