



Dueling in Tallahassee: Leigh Read v. Augustus Alston

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Abstract

Dueling in Territorial Tallahassee changed the politics of the newly founded capital and posed an issue for the leaders who would come to take charge of the area. Despite Tallahassee being Florida's first capital, much of its history has been hidden from the public and manipulated by historians and writers of the time to display a specific narrative, one that embellishes specific historic figures rather than others. The researcher explored the many duels of the capital city, those from 1826-1840, and attempted to discover more about why they were so important for the future of the state. In doing this research, the primary goal is to detail exactly what happened during the Leigh Read v. Augustus Alston duel and explore the extensive documentation and dramatic details that makes this event particularly interesting. This study examines letters, newspapers, court documents, and includes conversations with Dr. James M. Denham on his prior studies to construct an accurate picture of dueling in Territorial Tallahassee. Through this examination, the researcher discovered that Alston manipulated the duel in many ways to win, yet was so overconfident that he caused his own demise. Also, after the turmoil resulting from the incident, the town and its lawmakers were so aghast that duels in the town ceased to exist. Via reenactment at Tallahassee's Bicentennial and presentation, the researcher hopes to inform the public about dueling in Territorial Tallahassee and its importance.



Yager Rifle in the 1840s

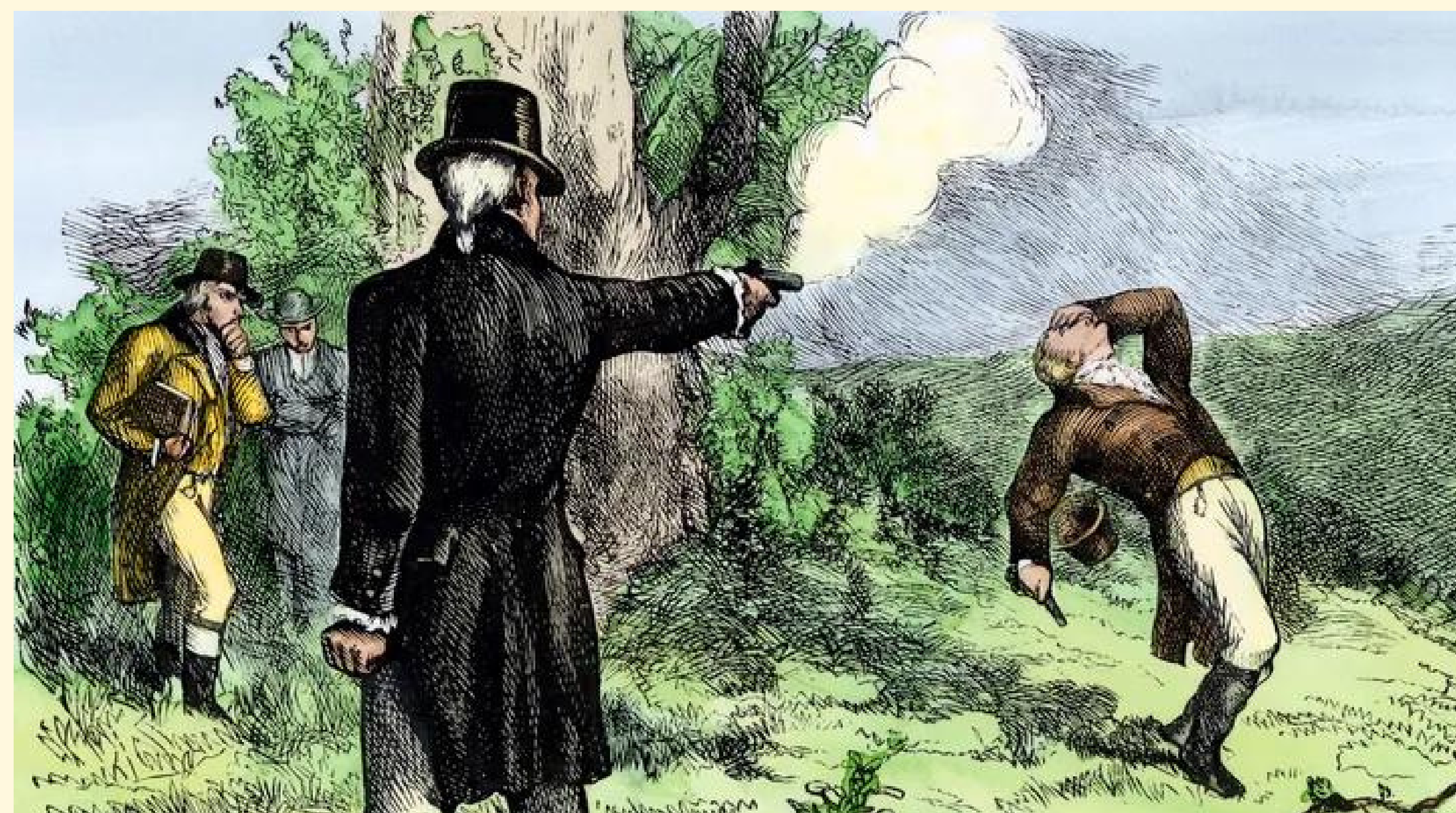
Methods

This study examines newspapers, letters, legal documents, and prior studies to construct an accurate picture of dueling in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The methods for this research were done in three steps throughout the duration of the study.

Orientation – The researcher examined primary and secondary sources to get an overview of early Territorial Florida (1821-1841).

Specialization – The researcher built an annotated bibliography of primary and sources that reflected the special interest during this period-dueling in Territorial Tallahassee.

Intersection – The researcher identified one primary source where dueling was highlighted: a first hand account detailing the events of the Read-Alston duel recorded in the territory.



Example of what duels in the time period looked like: William Harcourt Hooper, 1901

Introduction

On December 12, 1839, a duel was fought between Leigh Read and Augustus Alston of Tallahassee. Alston was a Whig while Read was a Democrat making the two long term political enemies. They decided that a duel would be the best way to fix their personal and partisan differences. After a misshot from Alston, he was killed at the scene of the duel. The story continued when another member of the Alston family came to town seeking revenge. Thus, this violence led to a two-year long feud that pitted the leading members of the two political parties against one another. This story matters today because it changed the politics of the newly founded Florida Territory. The researcher aimed to uncover more information about the Read-Alston duel as well as see how the many duels in the capital affected legislation in Territorial Tallahassee. This research is to be used to put on a performance and showcase the rich history of the capital through Tallahassee's Bicentennial celebrated by Theater with a Mission.

Conclusions

In her investigation, the researcher set out to find what exactly the Read-Alston saga was and how such an event could be brought to life. Through the methods of study, the researcher was able to find out that the duel of Leigh Read and Augustus Alston had a long history before the duel on *December 12, 1840*. Both Augustus and Read had served in the Seminole Wars. Unlike Read, Augustus Alston and his brother, Willis, were feared duelists in the early 1800s. Augustus was known for challenging men to duels at the slightest of insults. Read was publicly on record as an opponent of dueling and although challenged many times in his career, never accepted challenges until Alston's insults harmed his career.

Conclusions: Continued

In order to retain his position in society, Read challenged “the bull dog of the Whig party” (Augustus Alston) to a duel. As the Code Duello (the guidelines for dueling) states, the challenged man chose the rules that both men were to follow. Within the next 24 hours, the duel was to be fought. The principals were to stand at fifteen paces, facing away from each other. At their seconds' command with the word “wheel”, the men were to turn and at the count of “one, two, three, four” to fire. The chosen weapon was the Yager rifle, which was described as both “extremely heavy and a powerful weapon.” Alston made sure he had the advantage in these rules as he was a first rate shot with this rifle and Read's wrist was injured at the time, making it difficult for him to be able to shoot and aim quickly/accurately. On the morning of December 12, Augustus Alston was accompanied by his brother-in-law, Decimus A. Gaillard, as his second and his surgeon, Dr. James Randolph. Leigh Read arrived with his second, US Army Captain Guyon and his surgeon, Dr. McMormick. They headed towards Mannington. This site is on the Florida-Georgia line and was the location of other prominent duels such as Murat-Macomb and Campbell-Hamlin duels. It was recorded that Alston was very confident and unafraid, so much that he directed his wife, Mary, and his sisters to prepare a sumptuous dinner for him and his friends upon their return. Much of Tallahassee's population gathered at Mannington to watch the duel take place. At the direction of their seconds, the adversaries assumed dueling positions and began to wheel. Before the third count, Alston slipped due to his overconfident haste and fired the rifle-ball through the oaks behind Read. Knowing his fate, Alston solemnly faced Read clutching his rifle close to his heart. Alston had set up the duel in a way that he knew he would win with such a weapon choice and shooting early, thus breaking the rules of dueling. Because of this behavior and wanting to be rid of the man, Read took careful aim and sent the rifle-ball through Alston's chest, killing him instantly. Political havoc ensued due to the two men's positions as leaders of their respective political parties.

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