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CONTENTS

ROBERT N. GOURDIN TO ROBERT ANDERSON, 1861 [1]

Contributed by SAMUEL G. STONEY

Robert Newman Gourdin, the son of Samuel and Mary Doughty Gourdin, was born at Buck Hall Plantation, Cooper River, March 29, 1812, and died at Charleston, February 16, 1894. A graduate of the South Carolina College, he was admitted to the Bar in 1834. He later became a member of the factorage firm of Gourdin, Matthiessen and Company, of which his brother Henry Gourdin was senior partner. During his term as alderman of Charleston he negotiated the purchase of the property on the river side of South Battery, so that the White Point Gardens might be extended completely across the southern end of the city. This property was afterwards sold by the city.

On November 7, 1860, Robert Gourdin was serving as foreman of the Grand Jury in the United States District Court in Charleston. On that morning the election of Lincoln was declared. Gourdin announced to the court that the jury, taking into consideration the issues involved and considering that the court was the organ and minister of the Federal Government, respectfully declined to proceed with their presentments. His action was followed at once by the resignation of Judge Magrath, James Conner, the United States district attorney, and the clerk.

The home of Henry and Robert Gourdin [2] was at the north-east corner of Meeting Street and the Battery. Here they dispensed so much hospitality that it was said that the guests of the city were the guests of the Gourdins. It was in this fashion that Major Anderson had become a friend of Robert Gourdin. Anderson had requested Gourdin to become his envoy to Washington, but Gourdin had refused the complicating task.

Private

Charleston 2d February 1861

My dear Major:

Your beef, vegetables and sugar was sent you this morning. I now desire to write you a few lines of a personal and private nature. I hope you have read Mr. Hugers letter carefully and repeatedly, and that

[1] This copy of the original letter in the Robert Anderson Papers, Library of Congress, Vol. 10: 2231, was kindly presented Mr. Stoney by W. S. Swanberg, who used brief excerpts from it in his recently published *First Blood: the Story of Fort Sumter.* A review of Mr. Swanberg's book appears in this issue.

[2] The two Gourdins were among the Charlestonians who after Calhoun's death helped to pay off his debts. Before the evacuation of Charleston they arranged that his body be concealed to avoid the possibility of its being outraged. This *Magazine,* LVII (1956), 57.

And Joseph Brevard concluded:

> It must . . . be acknowledged, that this absurd and fatal custom, has produced that gentleness and complaisance which distinguishes modern manners, and that respectful attention of one man to another, which renders the social intercourses of life far more decent and agreeable, than among the most civilized nations of antiquity.[23]

Without question, the duel tended to curb loose talk. This no doubt had its advantages. But it also interfered with free expression; newspaper editors, for instance, were restricted in the use of their critical faculties. To the extent that restrictions on speech encourage sober reflection, such restrictions might be desirable but the advantages gained must always be balanced against the evils attendant on the practice.

Two general impressions are derived from this brief survey of some South Carolina attitudes toward duelling. First, it appears that opinion opposed to the duel became more widespread and more firmly held between 1750 and 1812, at which time the practice was defined by the statutes as a serious crime. Secondly, it is quite clear that among those who approved of the custom the overwhelming reason was the belief that the duel performed a needed function in the community.

[23] Brevard, *op. cit.*, p. 272 n. Both sides of the duelling question are argued with conviction by S. H. Dickson, "Duelling," *Russell's Magazine,* I (May 1857), 132-142, and W. J. Grayson, "The Duel," *Russell's Magazine,* I (August 1857), 439-454.

you have given to it a candid consideration. It presents points strongly and gravely applicable to your case in the present position of the Country.

I will now advert to your letter of the 28th ulto: and you must not be offended if I venture to comment with freedom upon a portion of it. I think you have fallen into a terrible error, and I would not be your friend did I keep silence in reference to it. In this letter you said, "of one thing all may be assured, that if an attack is made, and I am convinced that the work will be carried, God willing, the Fort will fall into the possession of the state in such a condition that no flag can be raised on its walls. I am opposed to this shedding of blood, but if the strife be forced upon me, and we are overcome by numbers, not a soul will, probably, be found alive in the ruins of the work." I read this declaration with profound, unmitigated regret, for I cannot but regard such a determination altogether inconsistent with your convictions of the right and wrong of this unhappy controversy and with your duty as a Christian man and a Christian soldier. It is your opinion that so many states having seceded, all idea of coercion should be abandoned; that coercion in these circumstances is impossible, and wicked; that it will lead to Civil war, and cannot accomplish the purpose intended, that is preserve the Union—Moreover, your conviction is that the South has been outraged, that her happiness, peace and safety will be sacrificed by the accession of the Black Republican party to power, and you have said that you condemn and despise this party.

Now with these facts and convictions deeply fixed, as I know they are, in your mind, can you believe that the honour and safety of the Government you represent are so involved in the defence of Fort Sumter that, if it is to fall, it must be reduced to ruin, even though every human being wthin its walls shall perish? Review this determination, my friend, it is not the legitimate sequence of your convictions of the right and wrong of this quarrel; it does not bear the test of sober reason, it is not justified by any principle of duty; I am quite sure that humanity and religion condemn it, and the civilization of our age cannot and will not sustain it.

Perhaps, you have been irritated by the bitter feeling in South Carolina in reference to this fort. But discriminate for a moment, and you will probably make some allowance for our people. They, with the people of five other states, have been forced by injustice and outrage to retire from this Confederacy. They have been, and they are still endeavouring to negotiate at Washington a peaceable dissolution of

their relations with other former confederates, and to this end they propose to compensate the Government for all property owned by it in So: Ca: and to assume their share of the public debt. And yet, unless Col. Hayne is more successful than the Commissioners the Govt. will persist in holding Sumter, a fort which controuls our harbour, our commerce, and the very safety of our homes. It is natural that our people should feel keenly this state of things in our harbour; but their bitterness is not against you and your Command, but against the Govt, which keeps you where you are, and gladly would they see you relieved from your painful position and departing from them in peace. I believe, as I live in the presence of Almighty God, that the authorities and the people of South Carolina would assail you and your small force *only* under the solemn conviction that the time had come when it is absolutely necessary to have fort Sumter. You have friends here who pray night and morning that this strife may be averted. I am not in the Governors Counsels, but it is my belief, and I entertain it with confidence, that, if it be necessary, to insure the peaceful delivery of Sumter to South Carolina, she will avail of the influence of the Southern Confederacy, that hostilities and civil war may be avoided. No, my friend, in no aspect of this issue can I discover any justification for the resolution expressed in the extract taken from your letter, and I entreat you to reconsider and reflect well upon the subject. The people of South Carolina, if compelled by the Govt. at Washington to attack fort Sumter, should not be regarded as ruthless invaders and aggressors; their relations to that post give them a claim to it which should protect them against being so considered. So much for them, and now one word more in reference to yourself. I repeat, I cannot discover the duty or the honour involved in maintaining Sumter, even to destruction of the works and of every life within its walls. What is to be accomplished by this? Nothing, absolutely nothing, excepting deep self-inflicted wrong by those who sanction and perpetrate the act.

You said to me on Thursday (that is, if I am not mistaken) that the course of Kentucky would influence your decision upon the points we then discussed. You have, no doubt, read Govr. Magoffin's Message, which I sent you. He is clear and strong on this Southern question, and the Legislature has passed a resolution, with only some five dissenting votes, denouncing the doctrine of coercion and declaring that Kentucky will make common cause with the South if coercion is attempted with any of her Sister Southern states. I wish you had some of your old and confidential friends at hand, with whom you might confer at this important moment. But you will, I am sure, receive with kindness what

I have written. If there is in this letter one word, or one expression which offends believe me it was never so designed and forgive me.

I am my dear Major, Yours with regard

ROBERT N. GOURDIN

Major Robert Anderson, Fort Sumter

Saturday night

My letter was written this morning, alone in my chamber, I have been reading it before closing it for the mail, and this idea of destroying Sumter and perishing in its ruins, because it may not be defended, seems to me so extraordinary that I am constrained to recur to the subject.

You have said to me repeatedly that the Govt. should withdraw the troops from this harbour. Still, it does not, and you and our people are kept, through its agency, in a false relation to each other—a relation mutually deplored. God grant that the Govt. may see, as you and I do, that a Southern Confederacy is inevitable, and that humanity, justice, and the civilization of the age demand that this resolution shall be bloodless. I hope with you that it will. But suppose we are disappointed in this; and it resolves to hold this fort after every proper effort is made by the South to induce it to retire, and to retrocede it to this state, and a conflict is, ultimately, the consequence. If it should be your fate to be overcome, would you terminate the unhappy struggle by the horrible tragedy indicated in your letter? God of mercy and Justice forbid it, and save you from an error so fatal. It seems to me that having faithfully, bravely, and gallantly defended your post, if defend it you must, duty to yourself, and to those committed to your charge would require you to submit to that which you may not have the power to avert. Who would condemn you—Who would dare even to censure you for having terminated a conflict when its prosecution had become unavailing and hopeless? On the other hand, if in obedience to a false conception of duty or of honour you sacrifice, recklessly and heedlessly, your own life, and the lives of others, what will be your record here, and hereafter?

My dear Major, do not regard me as presuming to [*illegible*] you—As you know, I feel deeply on this subject, and will do every thing that an honourable man may to avert strife and secure peace. But, if strife must come, I will gladly labour to mitigate its horrors, and assuage the sufferings it will entail upon the country. God bless and direct you. I am your friend

ROBERT N. GOURDIN
P. T. O.

I have not written to Mr. Holt, as I said I would, advising the arrangements in reference to your mails and supplies as being now established. I wish you would have this matter well understood in Washington. Should Mr. Holt answer my letter, I will touch on these matters in my next to him.

Yours,

R. N. G.