

Southern honor

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY L. MAREN WOOD

From Diary, 1857, Thomas C. Bowie Diary and Day Book # 932-z, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

As you read...

SOUTHERN HONOR

Thomas Bowie's diary provides us an opportunity to explore the culture of Southern honor. Bowie was a teenager when he wrote this diary and he was clearly anxious about his position in society. Throughout this diary, Bowie recorded his attempts to assert himself in all social settings: challenging authority figures, courting women, and fighting with his peers. Bowie wanted to be "No. 1." Through this diary, we can see a young man from an elite Southern family struggle to establish himself as a man of honor.

Honor was more than a man's reputation; it was the measure of his worth to his family and community. It was not assumed that all elite men had honor; it was something a man had to prove to his community by his actions.

To be considered honorable, a man had to be honest, religious, and active in the political and social life of his community. He had to be respectful of white women and generous to those of lower status in his community.

A man of honor also had to learn to control his temper and only use violence in ways that were sanctioned by his community, such as in hunting, duels, physical contests with his peers, or disciplining a slave.

A man's ability to secure credit depended on his reputation, and a man with honor was a safe bet for someone with money to lend. A man who was thought to be honorable was someone other community members trusted and looked to for leadership. An honorable man could hold public office, or he might be asked to participate in community ventures such as building canals or developing a school or university. A man of honor could expect to marry a woman from a respectable family.

If a man was insulted or challenged, therefore, he needed to defend himself, because honor was the key to his financial, political, and social success. Yet in defending his honor, a man had to be cautious. If he gained a reputation as a person with a bad temper or was too quick to use violence, he would be considered less honorable — but a man who let anyone insult him was a coward.

The honor code of the South was a variation of ideas about manliness that dated back to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe. In the U.S. South, this code of honor was modified and used by elite whites to justify their position of power in a slave society.

Elite whites believed that only they had honor, and that they therefore had a duty to protect and govern blacks who were enslaved and poor whites who were inferior. It was also left up to men to protect female relatives from the insults of poor whites, dishonorable elite whites, and African Americans. This code of

honor, therefore, not only justified slavery, but also justified the limited opportunities of elite Southern women because it justified keeping them in the home and focused on family life.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How did Bowie view people in authority at school, church, and home? Why do you think it was so important for him to challenge these people? Do you think he really came out “No. 1?”
2. How did Bowie’s peers test his honor?
3. To how many women was Bowie supposedly engaged over this six-month period? How would his popularity with women affect his claims to manliness and honor?
4. How many times did Bowie talk about insults and fighting?
5. How many times did Bowie go hunting? How many animals did he reportedly kill? Do you think he was that successful? Why was being a good hunter important to Bowie?
6. In what ways could Bowie’s actions be interpreted by his friends and families as dishonorable?

Thursday January 1st Miss B. died of a broken heart¹ poor thing how few of thy sex are affected that way.

Friday, January 2nd Every dog will have his day this day I have had mine.

Saturday, January 3rd: Had an awful fuss with S.R.² and came off No. 1. Old Mag died

Monday, January 5th Said every lesson perfectly excepting mine which I missed altogether quarreled with teacher came off No. 1.

Tuesday, January 6th Five turkeys drowned and buried all of them in one hole.

Wednesday, January 7th, Awfully in love with Miss F and wish she was my wife.

Thursday January 8th: Feel mighty jealous of Mr. J. I thank God he got an awful ducking³.

Friday January 9th: Got my fingers in the fire young ladies are mad so was I.

Saturday, January 10th: Received several insults and was not able to get satisfaction Neither by whipping them nor by receiving apologies from the insulter.

Sunday, January 11th: Went to church as usual text was fine and sermon poor. Killed dozen cedar birds.

Monday, January 12th: Did not go to school owing to some business which requires my presence at home.

Thursday, January 13th Stole several valuable articles which belonged to me and was charged of theft by a thief.

Wednesday January 14th: Apology received for a noolding (miserable dietu (s.p. original transcript) Rained like the old mischief.

Thursday, January 15th Dreadfully in love with Miss F love not reciprocated but think it will be.

Friday, January 16th: My mustache still growing. Whiskers not improving.

Saturday, January 17th: Went hunting killed two deer with my rifle at the distance of two hundred and fifty yards.

Sunday, January 18th: Of course I went to church and read the best of all novel's called Talisman⁴.

Monday, January 19th: A great many young ladies came here to dinner all pretty but one she is beautiful Oh! That she was mine.

Tuesday, January 20th: C.G. told me the largest lie I have ever heard says Miss F gave him her hand and heart, an impossibility as it already belongs to me.

Wednesday, January 21st: Old Gawers dog Wabum died after having spent fifteen years in company of his master.

Thursday, January 22nd: Received a letter from Charles saying he had found a sweetheart for me by the name of Miss Garva butchers daughter⁵.

Friday, January 23rd: Jim B. and old Valentine got into a quarrel but a fight did not occur as one was afraid and the other dared not to.

Saturday, January 24th Called on young ladies Miss E— promised to be my wife on Dec. 15 so friends, all come to my wedding.

Sunday, January 25th: Did not go to church as preacher was sick owing to having indulged in a frolic⁶ the night previous.

Monday, January 26th: I will be doggon my skin if Miss F. is not the prettiest and loveliest girl in the world she has promised me this day to be my wife.

Tuesday, January 27th: Called on Miss F. and the result was the match was broken off an ugly old witch.

Wednesday, January 28th: G.B. and I had three games of billiards beat him every game and robbed of 75 cts.

Thursday, January 29th: Elliot myself Betty Dunbar rode all over Natchez in search of Miss F and received a ring⁷ from her.

Friday, January 30th: Henry Marshall and I called on Miss F and as we went away I slyly unknowing to Henry gave her a sweet nice kiss

Saturday, January 31st: F. Matters all arranged. Stratton is the Parson engaged. In the meanest humor that ever was in.

Saturday February 1st The old dun cow and a calf this morning and an old Negro man tuck his departure to the Bourne from whence no traveler returns.

Monday, February 2nd:

Tell me ye winged winds that round my pathway roar⁸
Do ye not know some place where women come no more
Some lonely dell some holler in the ground where
Women are not seen and babies are not found.
The Keen wind blew the snow in my face
And snickered as it said Nary place.

Wednesday, February 4th It is strange that I am so beautiful and so full and so full of fun that on the ladies catalogue I should stand No. 1.

Thursday, February 5th: I.R. B. is setting up to Miss Des. Like a sick kitten to a hot brick bat⁹.

Friday, February 6th: Times are hard and money scarce and the blues have the upper hand on me. Nothing remarkable occurred to day.

Saturday, February 7th: Fell in love with Miss Hendrick have reciprocated and all the affairs arranged satisfactory.

Sunday, February 8th: Went to church Text was this why was Noah considered the meanest rat catcher in that ever existed: Answer: Because he sought forty days and forty nights before he found Arrat¹⁰.

Monday, February 9th: Heard the painful news of the death of Miss Henderson. Alas Alas they memory will always be cherished with the fondest recollections.

Tuesday, February 10th: Did nothing whatsoever to day owing to my having blues resulting from the death of Miss Henderson.
Received an awful scolding from father but received an apology afterwards.

Wednesday February 11th: Just joined the no nothing party and am the greatest no nothing in party.
Niggars are dancing.

Thursday, February 12th: Weather has been very dry to day having commenced raining at 2 in the morning and is pouring down pitchforks at present.

Friday, February 13th: I do think old H. M. is the biggest fool that I ever saw. He never gives me a chance to talk to Miss Jenny Elliot.

Sunday, February 14th: Went Hunting today killed two deer forty ducks by dinner time. Had a chill in the afternoon.

Sunday, February 14th: Could not go to church owing to a heavy rain, but to make up for it I read the bible all day.

Monday, February 16th: I and some young ladies went fishing platform fell in, and the ladies and I all fell in the water together. Happy time.

Tuesday, February 17th: Was accused of having broken down the platform and was wrongfully scolded for it by the old folks. This evening received an apology for scolding and I'm at the boat.

Wednesday February 18th: The weather has been very warm to day. The ponds are frozen over and snow is all over the roofs.

Thursday, February 19th: Pa has got the blues because there is no news in the paper, says he is a ruined man.

Friday, February 20th: The whole house is in a commotion because father and Judge Sparow are spouting forth politics like whiskey out of a tar barrel.

Saturday, February 21st: No nothing is a head and I am member in every sense of the word.

Sunday, February 22nd: Went to Church went to sleep text was good sermon fine. Killed an owl.

Monday, February 23rd: Tried on a new coat fits like a rat's tail in a tar barrel. Roads are very dry. Every step horse takes he goes up to his knees in mud.

Tuesday, February 24th: When I met S. M. by the powers of Moses I shall give him a whipping or get one myself for I will take an insult from no one.

Wednesday, February 25th: Met S.M. this morning and I rather think I gave him a tanning that he will recollect to his dying day.

Thursday, February 26th Old Mr. M. spoke very imprudently to me concerning my treatment to his son. My respect for age only saved him from a whipping.

Friday, February 27th: Boys you can joke and carry on in a pleasant manner with me but insult me not for I will not take one even from my brother. Nothing occurred today.

Saturday, February 28th: Several young men and myself got in an awful frolic to-day but had a very pleasant time.

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Notes

1. Bowie's diary is very dramatic and full of exaggerations, so we should not necessarily believe everything he says. It is possible that this woman died, since the mortality rate of young people in the antebellum period was quite high. It is also possible that this was a woman whom Bowie had courted and broken up with. In antebellum novels and short stories, fictional young women often died of broken hearts if they were jilted by unfaithful suitors. Since the rest of the

sentence is sarcastic, Bowie might have written this line tongue-in-cheek and used this dramatic sentence to imply that he had broken up with this young woman.

2. S.R. probably stands for “Senior,” and refers to his father.
3. “Ducking” in this context most likely means a beating.
4. *Talisman* is a novel by Sir Walter Scott, a Scottish novelist and poet. The novel is the sequel in a series about the Third Crusade (late twelfth century C.E.), in which European leaders fought to reconquer the Holy Land from Muslims.
5. The butcher’s daughter was below Bowie in social status and so this suggestion by his friend was meant as an insult.
6. Bowie used “frolic” to mean a drinking with friends. It is possible that the minister was suffering from having drunk too much alcohol the night before, or that Bowie wrote this as an insult to the minister who was legitimately ill. A man of honor could hold his liquor, and Bowie made it clear in other entries that he did not respect the minister.
7. A present from a young woman, such as a ring, was a sign of her affection for Bowie.
8. The first three lines are from the poem “Tell Me, Ye Winged Winds” by the Scottish Poet Charles Mackay. The last three lines are probably by Bowie.
9. A brickbat is an old term for a piece of a brick. It could be heated in a fireplace and used to keep a sick or motherless kitten warm.
10. In the Biblical story of Noah and the flood, Noah’s ark came to rest on Mount Ararat after forty days and forty nights of rain. “Meanest” in this sense means worst — Noah needed forty days to catch “Arrat” (Ararat).

The pun probably isn’t worth the explanation.

About the author

L. MAREN WOOD

Maren Wood is a research associate with LEARN NC’s North Carolina History Digital Textbook Project. She is a Ph.D. candidate in the department of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, having received a B.A. from the University of Lethbridge (Alberta, Canada) and an M.A. in British History from Carleton University (Ottawa, Canada). Her dissertation is titled *Dangerous Liaisons: Narratives of Sexual Danger in the Anglo-American North, 1750 to 1820*.