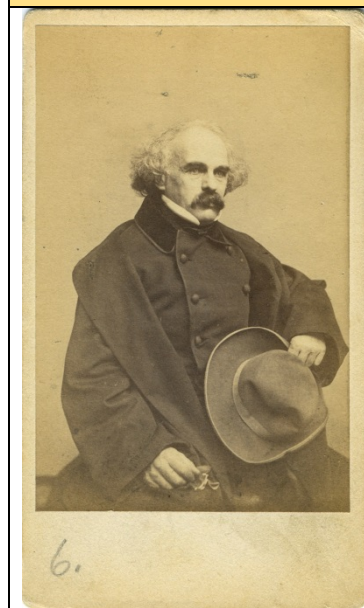


## Chapter 118 -- Another Fatal Duel Underscores The Violent Tone In Congress



**Dates:**  
1838

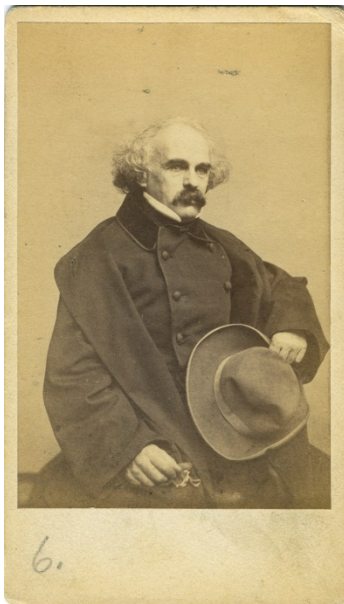
**Sections:**

- Congressmen Jonathan Cilley Is Killed In A Duel

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Time: February 24, 1838

### Congressmen Jonathan Cilley Is Killed In A Duel



Even as Lincoln is calling for civil restraint, America's penchant for settling disputes through violence is once again materializing in the halls of Congress.

This time it involves a duel between two sitting members of the U.S. House.

This duel originates with James Watson Webb, editor of the powerful Whig newspaper, *The New York Courier and Enquirer*. Webb is famous for scurrilous ad hominem attacks, many directed at abolitionists such as Lewis Tappan.

When Congressman Jonathan Cilley of Maine, also an abolitionist, questions the veracity of Webb's reporting on the House floor, Webb demands a public retraction. He writes a note to this effect and hands it to Congressman William Graves of Kentucky for delivery. Graves tries to deliver the note to Cilley, but he refuses to accept it.

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) Eulogizes  
Congressman Jonathan Cilley (1802-1838)

His response, however, is conciliatory. He tells Graves that he simply wants to avoid any further unpleasantness with Webb -- but Graves finds this response insufficient and challenges Cilley to a duel.

Cilley accepts and settles on rifles as his weapon of choice.

The two men and their seconds meet on February 24, 1838, at the Bladensburg Dueling Grounds in Maryland.

They are placed 80 yards apart from each other and given the order to fire. When neither man is hit, the seconds attempt to end the matter, especially since both combatants claim no "personal animosity" toward the other.

But a truce is not to be, and another round is fired, again with misses from both men. In the third round, Graves scores a hit, striking Cilley in the upper thigh and puncturing his femoral artery. Cilley falls to the ground and bleeds to death in two to three minutes, absent a tourniquet.

He is 35 years old when killed, and leaves behind a wife and three children, and a sterling reputation.

His close friend and fellow Bowdoin College classmate, Nathaniel Hawthorne, commemorates him in a eulogy at the funeral.

*Alas that over the grave of a dear friend my sorrow for the bereavement must be mingled with another grief, --that he threw away such a life in so miserable a cause! Why, as he was true to the Northern character in all things else, did he swerve from his Northern principles in this final scene?*

*A challenge was never given on a more shadowy pretext; a duel was never pressed to a fatal close in the face of such open kindness as was expressed by Mr. Cilley; and the conclusion is inevitable, that Mr. Graves and his principal second, Mr. Wise, have gone further than their own dreadful code will warrant them, and overstepped the imaginary distinction, which, on their own principles, separates manslaughter from murder.*

*But his error was a generous one, since he fought for what he deemed the honor of New England; and, now that death has paid the forfeit, the most rigid may forgive him. If that dark pitfall--that bloody grave --had not lain in the midst of his path, whither, whither might it not have led him! It has ended there: yet so strong was my conception of his energies, so like destiny did it appear that he should achieve everything at which he aimed, that even now my fancy will not dwell upon his grave, but pictures him still amid the struggles and triumphs of the present and the future.*