

A Nevis 'Legend' Revisited: the Huggins-Maynard Duel of 1822

A legend surrounds the estate of 'Eden Browne' in the parish of St James Windward on the island of Nevis. It involves a duel between members of the Huggins and Maynard families. The story includes a ghost who is supposed to haunt the abandoned Great House. According to one website the ghost has even been captured on film. Like all good legends the details of the story vary according to which source you read or who tells it. However, the basic ingredients run something like this.



Buildings at the entrance to Eden Browne estate

In 1822 the Huggins family, who owned 'Eden Browne', and the Maynards, who owned a neighbouring estate, were gathering at Eden Browne to celebrate a forthcoming marriage between Julia Huggins and Walter Maynard. Shortly before the wedding a quarrel developed between the best man, Julia's brother John, and the groom. One version has it that the quarrel was over a beautiful 'mulatto' slave girl. In any event a challenge was issued, and in the ensuing duel Walter Maynard shot John Huggins dead, although another version tells that both men were killed. Unsurprisingly, Julia Huggins is supposed to have been distraught at having lost her love and her brother and died years later, a grieving spinster at her family home of Mountravers. It is her ghost which is 'seen' haunting Eden Browne. Other versions leave out Julia and have John Huggins as the bridegroom and an un-named bride.

The trouble with such legends is that they take a grain of truth and then get horribly muddled in the telling – and the story is retold endlessly on Nevis, often to enhance the tourism 'product'. In the course of current, independent, research into the lives of the

enslaved people of the Pinney/Huggins estate at Mountravers we and others have uncovered a number of references to this duel, which present an opportunity for straightening out some, but not all, of the details. It is our hope that other researchers and those who may be holding Huggins or Maynard family papers will be able to clarify other details.

The Nevis Slave Registers show that in 1817 'Eden' (Eden Browne), whose early history was given in the 1999-2000 issue of the *St Kitts and Nevis Visitor*, was owned by, or 'in the lawful possession of', a Mrs Ann Hutton. By 1822 the estate had been bought from Mrs Hutton by the Huggins family and belonged to, or was 'in the lawful possession of', John Huggins.ⁱ The reason for the caution here is that after the duel the estate turns up in the will of his father Edward Huggins senior. The other relevant detail about John Huggins is that Huggins family trees and wills, copies of which are in the Nevis Historical and Conservation Society (NHCS) archive, show that at the time of the duel in 1822 he was already married to Elizabeth Mary Moreton, thus ruling him out as the *groom*.

Edward Huggins senior is well known on Nevis for having been tried and acquitted in doubtful circumstances of various acts of cruelty to his enslaved people and it is not the intention to revisit those stories yet again. He was clearly the subject of a great deal of ill feeling among some of the resident planters and it is instructive that it was a Maynard who proposed the first motion of censure against Huggins in the island's Assembly in 1810. This was after Huggins had ordered the brutal flogging of enslaved workers from Mountravers in the public market.ⁱⁱ Thus there was a lot of ill will between the Maynard and Huggins families going back to at least 1810 and probably much earlier.

The legend is unclear about which Walter Maynard was involved in the duel, Walter being a common name in the Maynard family.ⁱⁱⁱ However, the 1822 register of enslaved people shows that Walter Maynard owned an estate called New River.^{iv} It was an estate into which his father (who had died in 1804) had already put a considerable sum of money.^v Maynard's New River was sandwiched between John Huggins's 'Eden' and Edward Huggins's estate, also called New River.

Walter Maynard (the son b. 1774), owner of New River, was for a very long period intermittently the President of the island's Council^{vi} and thus a very powerful individual on the island. He also had an unsavoury reputation among some estate owners connected with Nevis. Because of this Mrs Ames, one of the absentee owners of Stoney Grove estate and a daughter of John Pretor Pinney, turned down an offer from him to buy Stoney Grove plantation in 1831. She had gathered from her contacts that he was 'generally considered cruel towards his treatment of his slaves and that his habit of feeding them amounted to nearly starvation'.^{vii} Although there were many Walter Maynards the foreign news coverage of the duel identified the Walter Maynard involved as President of the Council.^{viii}

The one other key player in the legend is Julia Huggins. The only Julia Huggins to have come to light so far is the daughter of John's brother, Peter Thomas Huggins of Mountravers. It is not clear when she was born but various letters from her father suggest that she lived most of her life as a spinster at Mountravers and was buried on 24 June 1910 at St Thomas Lowland.^{ix} Had she been the grieving bride in 1822, she would have been at least 104 when she died, maybe even 108. This hardly seems likely, judging by the sprightly correspondence between her and the Leeward Islands' judge JS Udall in the early 1900s.

It seems that the story of the duel is more prosaic and is rooted in the clan hostilities between the two families. An account of it can be found in a letter written by Peter Thomas Huggins to his friend Charles Pinney on 1 August 1822 and, to lay Julia's ghost to rest, it is worth quoting the bulk of it:

I am sure you must have been shocked on hearing of the melancholy death of my most excellent Brother John by the hand of that ferocious wretch Walter Maynard persecuted as my Father has been by this man and his family by rancorous hatred and the blackest malevolence instigated by no other motive but envy. Yet upon all occasions he has been ready when in need to solicit favors from my Father and to abuse his neighbourly kindness after.

The origin of this lamentable occurrence (was this) Maynard's Blacksmith got a severe injury wch rendered him incapable of any service, Maynard applied to John for the loan of my Father's smith. John did not feel himself authorized to lend the smith without my Father's knowledge and accordingly he wrote to my Father and his answer was do as you like, "but I wish to have nothing to do with him for he has always been hostile to me". However poor John wishing to live on friendly terms lent the smith to work for Maynard at noon every day.

About this time Maynard prosecutes my Father's overseer for purchasing some boards wch he suspected were stolen from him. And as it was in the middle of the crop my Mother sent and requested Mr Maynard not to have judgement called upon this unfortunate fellow before the crop was off as they had no other overseer on the estate and my Father was blind and could not attend to it. His answer to this was by G- he wd put him in goal. My Father thought as he had so little consideration for his convenience he wd not suffer his smith to go every day to Maynard upon wch Maynard wrote him a letter and it was answered in as mild and temperate a way as possible. However a week after Maynard assaulted my Father in Town publicly in the street and challenged him who was blind to fight. John wrote him a letter wch I have requested Christopher Claxton to show you and the result was he sent John a challenge.

Poor John had no alternative left. John's friend used every exertion to avoid going to extremities and after the first fire he endeavoured but in vain to prevent further proceeding. Maynard void of religion or feeling glories from what I can learn in this heartrending transaction which has overwhelmed a whole family with grief.^x

Another detail may be relevant. The memorial tablet in St George Gingerland to various members of the Huggins family states that John Huggins died on 17 June 1822.

However, a complicated series of letters written by his brother Peter Thomas to Charles Pinney on 17 June and 26 June possibly indicates that the duel happened on 15 June which in turn suggests that John Huggins lingered a while after being struck down.^{xi} The other point to note is that the letter might be taken to suggest that Maynard refused to call a halt after the first shots had been fired. This may be the origin of the story that he was accused of being a 'murderer' by a lady who had turned down his offer of marriage.

More recently another account has surfaced from *De Curacaosche Courant*, dated 28 September 1822 but based on an account from Antigua dated 24 June 1822 - about a week after the duel. This puts a different colour on the actual events of the duel rather than the cause.

FATAL DUEL AT NEVIS. Antigua, June 24.—Inconsequence of some misunderstanding between Edward Huggins, Esquire, the elder, and the Honourable Walter Maynard, (President of the Island), a meeting was held at Nevis, on the 17th June, by the latter gentleman, and Mr. John Huggins (youngest son of the former) which we are sorry to state, terminated fatally! Mr. Huggins was mortally wounded, by his antagonist's ball penetrating and passing through the abdomen, and survived only three quarters of an hour.— What adds considerably to the pain of this sad event, Mr. Huggins had recently (seven months since) been united to an amiable and accomplished young lady, who, with a posthumous pledge of their union, will ever have to deplore the unfortunates result. It has been asserted—but we do not pledge ourselves for the accuracy of the statement—that Mr Maynard not intending to return Mr. Huggins's *first* fire, reserved his; and that, having *received* his opponent's, an overture for the adjustment of the matter was made, but not having been met with a corresponding feeling by the opposite party, the lamentable catastrophe was produced. It is, however, but justice to add, that Mr. Huggins, with his expiring breath, admitted the propriety and honor with which the whole proceeding had been conducted.

The accounts differ in several important areas. In contrast to the idea that the duel took place on 15 June, the account from Antigua states very clearly that the duel took place on 17 June - as do most accounts - and that John Huggins died within the hour. Perhaps more importantly, the account from Antigua states that Huggins fired first and missed. Maynard then held his fire while the seconds tried to negotiate a settlement which Huggins refused. As a consequence he was shot dead, though he is supposed to have exonerated Maynard from any improper conduct before he died.

To some degree the two different accounts have a flavour of both sides getting in early with their spin on the affair. As to the cause, from the August 1822 letter we only have a sad and angry Huggins account. However, it is clear that at least one neutral observer squarely laid the blame for the whole affair on Maynard. Henry Ransford, an estate manager on Stoney Grove who was not there at the time but must have heard the story many times and did know Maynard in the 1820s after the event, summed it up in his diary: 'There were two parties in the Island, the Maynards and the Huggins, a Maynard having shot a Huggins in a duel; overbearing conduct on the part of the Maynard being the cause of it. It was difficult but I kept reasonably friendly with both sides.'^{xii}

Maynard may have been an extremely unpleasant man (as was Edward Huggins senior) but it seems, however, that his sins were not visited upon his sons, the eldest of whom, John, went to Oxford and subsequently lived a quiet life as a vicar in the beautiful Suffolk village of Orford for 35 years.^{xiii}

As for the Huggins survivors of this story, it seems that John Huggins's widow Elizabeth grieved for a time but by 1827 she had remarried into the Herbert family. Eden Browne, the estate, went eventually to John's eldest brother Edward Huggins junior and through him to his son George Juxon Huggins with whom it appears, this time as Browne's Eden, as part of a settlement on the eve of his marriage to Caroline Jane Beard of St Kitts in 1841.^{xiv} She may be the widow, Mrs Huggins, mentioned as owner in Iles's list of 1871.^{xv}

It is worth considering that while these stories provide a supposedly 'romantic' backdrop to the history of the island – a backdrop to which visitors to the island have been

constantly introduced by the tourism authorities and sometimes even by the Nevis Historical and Conservation Society - nevertheless they serve to obscure a much bigger story. The same Pinney letter book, which contains Peter Thomas Huggins's letter about the duel, is full of correspondence from contacts on Nevis stating the distress and starvation caused by drought, near failure of the crop, absence of provisions and the lack of available credit with which to purchase them. Legislation was drawn up on the island to insist that supplying provisions had to be the first call on an estate. Innumerable robberies took place and several hundred hogsheads of sugar were lost to cane breakers. Thus Mills & Galpine wrote to Pinney & Ames on 23 April 1822 that the island was in a deplorable state, little sugar was being produced and no credit was to be had. 'How they are to feed their negroes the fall of this year God only knows - starvation and discontent will be the result. Parliamentary aid will be their only relief'.^{xvi}

The outcome of the duel was certainly a personal tragedy for the Huggins family but in the wider context of 1822 it is worth speculating on how enslaved men and women viewed one out-of-hand planter 'murdering' the son of another on the 'field of honour'.

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ⁱ UK National Archive (UKNA), T 71/364 and 365

ⁱⁱ UKNA, CO 152/100 Letter by James Webbe Tobin in the *St Christopher Gazette*, 30 December 1811

ⁱⁱⁱ We are very grateful to the staff of the NHCS Archive and to the late Vincent Hubbard for their help with the Maynard family trees.

^{iv} UKNA, T71/365

^v For details of how New River came to be owned by Walter Maynard, see the will of his father Walter Maynard, dated 28 February 1804, Nevis Book of Wills 1805-1818 ff117-124 <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP794-1-5-3>

^{vi} As snapshots, he was President of the Council in 1817 (Parliamentary Papers, Nevis Microfiche xvii.33), in 1821 (UKNA, Colonial Office Papers CO187/13), 1826 (Nevis Council and Assembly Minutes UKNA, CO186/13) and in 1829 (UKNA, CO186/13).

^{vii} Bristol University Library Special Collections (BULSC), Pinney Mss, Domestic Box I ii/30; see also R Pares *A West India Fortune* (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1950) p313 and p316

^{viii} See the Charleston S.C. *Courier* report of 2 November 1822 (Hamilton College, N.Y. Archive) - this report repeated in a Boston newspaper of similar date - and *De Curacaosche Courant* 28 September 1822. Sources courtesy of Vince Hubbard and Professor Neal Ferris.

^{ix} NHCS Archive, Gravestone Inscriptions, St Thomas Lowland Cemetery RG 9.1

^x BULSC, Pinney Mss, Domestic Box C2 Bundle 8

^{xi} BULSC, Pinney Mss, Letterbook 56

^{xii} Henry Ransford 'Dates and Events Connected with my Family (1667-1881)' in *Western Ontario History Nuggets* No 28 (1959) p21

^{xiii} Suffolk Record Office, Maynard Papers, HA 178/1/32.

The Maynard Papers include plans of New River (1854) and Coconut Walk (1860).

^{xiv} Herefordshire Record Office, Miscellaneous Papers, D 96/64

^{xv} JAB Iles *An Account Descriptive of the Island of Nevis, West Indies* 1871

^{xvi} BULSC, Pinney Mss, Letterbook 56