

# Levy L. Laurens: An Early Texan Journalist

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The early years of Mordecai Manuel Noah (1785–1851) and of his nephew Levy L. Laurens (1816–1837) contain certain remarkable parallels. Both spent at least part of their childhood in South Carolina; both began their careers in big cities (Philadelphia in one case, New York in the other); both, while in their teens, were attracted to the profession of journalism. In addition, both moved to capital cities to serve as legislative reporters (Noah to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; Laurens to Houston, then the capital of the Republic of Texas). Noah, who has been called the best-known Jewish layman in America before the Civil War, went on to well-documented fame.<sup>1</sup> But fate intervened to terminate arbitrarily the career of Levy L. Laurens. His early reputation has been completely forgotten by history. The encyclopedic *Handbook of Texas* has no mention of this early Texan journalist among its myriad entries. And, similarly, even the author of the definitive biography of Mordecai Noah appeared to be unaware of Laurens' existence.<sup>2</sup>

## A PERVADING GLOOM

Such a fate is ironic indeed when one considers the adulation that appeared in print after Laurens' untimely death following a duel fought in Houston on June 25, 1837. To acknowledge his passing, Houston's only newspaper was fringed in black, a tribute usually reserved for presidents, or statesmen of the highest eminence. The *Telegraph* of July 1, 1837, spared no words denoting sadness in expressing the grief the event brought to Texas:

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<sup>1</sup> See Jacob Rader Marcus, *Memoirs of American Jews, 1775–1865* (Philadelphia, 1955), I, p. 117.

<sup>2</sup> For the most complete account of Noah's life, see Isaac Goldberg, *Major Noah: American Jewish Pioneer* (Philadelphia, 1936).

When the capital is in mourning, it is meet that the *Telegraph* should display the emblems of wo[e]. The decease of the unfortunate Laurens, which has called forth this demonstration of sorrow, has thrown a pervading gloom over our city, and caused a more general manifestation of sincere grief, than we have ever before witnessed. This singularly interesting young man had resided in this place but a few weeks; a portion of which time, he was engaged in discharging the duties of reporter of the house of representatives: yet within this short period, his gentlemanly deportment and fascinating manners attracted to him a large circle of affectionate acquaintances, who viewed in him one of the noblest ornaments of society: a friend, whose generous bosom was inspired by every virtue which can elevate the human character, and ameliorate the condition of mankind. Frank, sincere, affectionate and generously confiding, he seemed incapable of suspecting crime in others. . . .<sup>3</sup>

Francis Moore, Jr. (1808–1864), who had recently become editor of the *Telegraph*,<sup>4</sup> seems to have been so shaken by the traumatic event that he expressed a desire to have sacrificed his life for his late friend's:

Science, genius and virtue had combined in bestowing on him such a lofty cast of character, that while his talents excited our highest admiration, his noble conduct so mastered our affections, that we felt towards him all the interest of a brother, and gladly, could we have been apprised of the transaction in season, would we have thrown our own bosom before the accursed rifle uplifted for his destruction, and prevented the foul deed, or perished in the attempt. . . .<sup>5</sup>

Moore went on to recount how Laurens' best friends bent "in anguish over his couch of death." He then concluded his characterization of Laurens, noting that

a large and respectable circle . . . have lost . . . a friend, whose high intellectual endowments and virtue promised to elevate him to the most exalted stations of public confidence. In him Texas has lost one of the first of that gallant and illustrious band of America's chivalry, which has so magnanimously rallied around the one-starred banner: displaying in the

<sup>3</sup> *Telegraph and Texas Register* (Houston), July 1, 1837.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Prescott Webb, ed., *The Handbook of Texas* (Austin, 1952), II, 229.

<sup>5</sup> *Telegraph and Texas Register* (Houston), July 1, 1837.

“land of Prairies” all that is admirable in fortitude, all that is lofty in heroism. . . .<sup>6</sup>

On another page of the *Telegraph*, an obituary provided the factual details of Laurens’ death, as well as some strong editorial feeling:

Never, we believe, have our columns contained a more shocking obituary than the present; never, we hope, will a similar one be furnished. *Died.* In this city on Tuesday last, *Levi L. Laurens*, aged about 21, late reporter of the house of representatives, and recently from New York City, of a wound received in a duel, at the hand of Dr. Chauncey Goodrich, recently from Vicksburg, Mississippi.<sup>7</sup>

According to Moore’s account in the *Telegraph*, Goodrich, “who so vilely called his victim to the dishonorable field, escaped unharmed: but the heroic and manly conduct of his fallen opponent extracted from him the warmest admiration, and a full and explicit retraction of the base calumny. . . .” Laurens, in the words of Moore, “fell a noble victim to one of the most fiendish, foulest practices that ever disgraced civilized society. . . .” The *Telegraph’s* dismay over the practice of dueling was almost limitless; it urged its readers to heed the example at hand and abolish this custom:

The peculiar situation of our country at this period imperatively demands that some efficient measures for the prevention of this accursed practice should be immediately adopted. . . . Had Laurens lived he would have been among the first to advocate a measure of this kind, for like the immortal Hamilton he abhorred the custom to which he fell a victim; and his able pen which has so frequently ornamented with its products the journals of his native country might have ensured success. . . .

May . . . the youth of this city . . . gather once more around his hallowed grave, and . . . pledge themselves to commence the foundation of an institution, which while Texas endures, will commemorate their virtue, and furnish as glorious evidence that *Laurens has not lived in vain.*<sup>8</sup>

#### THE WEAPON OF THE BRIGAND

News traveled slowly in pre-telegraph America. New Orleans did not learn of the event in Texas until more than half a month had

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

passed. Then some specific details of the fatal duel were reported in the *New Orleans Picayune* of July 18, 1837:

Dr. Chancery [*sic*] Goodrich, an assistant surgeon in the Army of Texas . . . had charged Mr. L. with stealing a large sum of money from him, and persisted in the truth of the charge.—Laurens, from the custom of the country, was driven to challenge, which was accepted. The parties met near the town of Houston on the 25th inst. They fought with rifles at the distance of sixty-five yards; the first fire Laurens fell, the ball of his antagonist having entered his right thigh and passed through his left. Dr. Goodrich escaped unhurt. The wound of Laurens was not considered mortal by his physicians, but he died next day from mortification and distress of mind. . . .

He was a native of South Carolina, and was a reporter of the Texian Congress at its last session. . . . So much was he respected that a donation was made by several citizens to have a monument erected to his memory. The editor of the *Houston Telegraph* calls upon every young man emigrating to Texas to visit the grave of the lamented Laurens, and make a vow to have nothing to do with duelling.<sup>9</sup>

It was not until a full month after the duel in Texas that the news arrived in Charleston and in New York. Then newspapers in both cities discussed at great length the sad occurrence. In Charleston, the *Courier* recorded, in part, that:

Mr. Levy L. Laurens, in the 22d year of his age . . . was a native of Charleston, S. C., and for several years a resident of New-York. . . . At an early age he emigrated from this state to New-York, where he was favored with the patronage of his uncle, M. M. Noah, Esq. . . . [He was] engaged in the editorial department of the *New York Evening Star*. A few months since he went to Texas, for the purpose of establishing there an independent press. . . . [He was] a dutiful son, an affectionate brother. . . .<sup>10</sup>

In New York City, Mordecai Manuel Noah presented a particularly complete report of the event to readers of his newspaper, the *Evening Star*.

Fatal Duel in Texas.—Mr. L. L. Laurens, long associated with us in

<sup>9</sup> *New Orleans Picayune*, July 18, 1837, cited in *The Evening Star (New York City)*, July 26, 1837.

<sup>10</sup> *Charleston Courier*, July 27, 1837.

editing the *Star*, we deeply regret to say, fell in a duel in Texas on the 25th of June, beloved and esteemed by all who knew him. The particulars of this unfortunate affair have reached us in a letter from Velasco.

Mr. Laurens, it seemed, roomed with several young friends, and a Dr. Goodrich, Assistant Surgeon of the Army, and on rising one morning missed some money which he hastily charged Mr. L. with having stolen, and refusing to withdraw the odious charge, he forthwith challenged him, when the Doctor, having the choice of weapons, selected the rifle, and they fought at sixty-five yards, and at the first fire Laurens fell. Dr. Goodrich subsequently expressed his conviction that he was in error, and when too late recanted his accusation.

Mr. L. was an early and ardent friend of Texas, and went there with brilliant prospects—was appointed Secretary or Reporter to Congress at a salary of eight dollars per day, and was arranging for the establishment of a Government paper, which would have been useful to the Republic and valuable to himself, when this unhappy event occurred. He was only twenty-two years of age, of great promise, and of amiable and honorable qualities. In a young country in arms it is almost impossible to avoid personal difficulties, but it should be an established principle never to settle a point of honor with rifles. It is the weapon of the Brigand.<sup>11</sup>

Although Laurens has been described in print as the nephew of Mordecai M. Noah, the relationship appears to have eluded historians. A probable explanation lies in the so-called missing years of Manuel Noah (1755–1822), Mordecai Noah's father. It has been related that following the death of his wife Zipporah at Charleston in 1792 Manuel Noah "disappeared" for at least two decades.<sup>12</sup> At any rate, writers who have dealt with Mordecai Noah's life have been unable to account for his father's whereabouts in this period.<sup>13</sup> Such an extensive gap is more than ample time for Noah to have remarried and become the parent of a child, who would later become Levy Laurens' mother. Mordecai Noah's only known sister, Judith, died unmarried at New York City in 1868.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Evening Star*, July 26, 1837.

<sup>12</sup> Goldberg, pp. 15–16, 129–30.

<sup>13</sup> Manuel Noah is known to have applied for membership in Philadelphia's Mikveh Israel Congregation in 1816 and to have died at New York City in 1822. Edwin Wolf II and Maxwell Whiteman, *History of the Jews of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1957), p. 177; Goldberg, p. 129.

<sup>14</sup> Goldberg, p. 15.

It seems particularly significant to note that Mordecai Noah, although a very prolific writer, never mentioned his father or his mother. The absence seems deliberate, the more so since he did write of his grandfather, Jonas Phillips (1735–1803).<sup>15</sup> If more were known of Manuel Noah's life, we probably would have important clues to Levy Laurens' background.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

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