

Jonathan Cilley

(2 Jul 1802 – 24 Feb 1838)

Biographical Directory of the United States Congress 1774-1989

A Representative from Maine; born in Nottingham, Rockingham County, N.H., July 2, 1802; attended Atkinson Academy, New Hampshire; was graduated from New Hampton Academy and later, in 1825, from Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Maine; studied law; was admitted to the bar in 1828 and commenced practice in Thomaston, Knox County, Maine; editor of the Thomaston Register 1829-1831; member of the State house of representatives 1831-1836 and served as speaker in 1835 and 1836; elected as a Jackson Democrat to the 25th Congress and served from March 4, 1837 until February 24, 1838 when he was killed in a duel (one of the last duellos in this country) on the Marlboro Pike, near Washington, D.C., by William J. Graves, a representative from Kentucky. Initially interred in the cemetery, his body has since been removed to Cilley Cemetery, Thomaston, Maine.

(His uncle, Bradbury Cilley, served as a Representative from New Hampshire and his brother, Joseph Cilley, served as a Senator from New Hampshire.)

The National Intelligencer, Wednesday, February 28, 1838

The Funeral of the late Hon. Jonathan Cilley, one of the Representatives in Congress from the State of Maine, took place from the Capitol, at the appointed time, yesterday. The Hall and Galleries of the Representatives Hall were crowded with Ladies and Gentlemen, besides a very general attendance of the Senators and Representatives. The religious ceremonies were a Prayer by the Rev. Mr. Slicer, and a Discourse by the Rev. Mr. Reese. After which the body was attended to the grave by both Houses of Congress, and, as usual by the President of the United States and the higher officers of the Government. No business was, of course, transacted in either House of Congress yesterday.

Ghosts, Washington's Most Famous Ghost Stories, John Alexander, The Washington Book Trading Company, 1988

Popular Congressman Jonathan Cilley of Maine was shot to death by Congressman William Graves of Kentucky, who was a stand-in for New York newspaper editor James W. Webb. Cilley had called Webb corrupt. Graves was a good friend of Webb's and took the charge personally. He felt that a remark against Webb was a remark against him.

Graves knew weapons and was an experienced marksman. Cilley knew nothing about guns, let alone dueling. The thirty-eight-year-old congressman had a wife and three children, took his work seriously, and tried to serve his district well. He seemed to try to put the challenge from Graves out of his mind. Some said that he never really expected it to come down to two grown men actually firing shots at each other. Graves, on the other hand, engaged in target practice for weeks before the duel.

On the cold winter morning agreed to by both parties, Graves showed up with a rifle much more powerful than the one Cilley brought. He was allowed to use it though. The seconds helped position the pair eighty paces apart. The count was shouted. Shots were exchanged, but no one was struck.

The bizarre scene was repeated, but again the results were the same. The seconds wanted both to agree they were satisfied, but Graves would not consider the request until they fired one more round. In the third round Cilley's left leg was shot out from under him. The bullet from Graves's high-powered rifle tore into a large artery in Cilley's left leg, and within ninety seconds life had ebbed from the body of

the young, likable congressman from Maine. Several members from the House and Senate watched...in silence.

Congressman Cilley had not yet been laid to rest in Congressional Cemetery when the public protest began. The tragic end of Jonathan Cilley so outraged Washington that the next session of Congress was forced to make dueling--or accepting or giving a challenge--a criminal offence within the District of Columbia.