

Alexander Hamilton's Feud and Duel with Aaron Burr Jr.

Introduction

This paper describes the background leading up to the Burr-Hamilton Duel. Hamilton had a 15 year battle with Burr that included political fighting and business conflicts. Finally, they settled their differences in Weehawken, New Jersey with a pair of Wogdon Pistols.

Alexander Hamilton

Hamilton was a controversial figure in his day, people tended either to love him or hate him. John Adams, one of the latter group, despite being a fellow Federalist, compared Hamilton to theologian John Calvin: "His merits with a party are the merits of John Calvin—'Some think on Calvin, heaven's own spirit fell, While others think him [an] instrument of hell.'

There is enough general knowledge on the life of Alexander Hamilton that for brevity sake I will omit his biography. However, it is important to note that in his first report to Congress as Secretary of the Treasury, in January 1790, he proposed a new excise tax on domestic distilled spirits (Whiskey Tax). Congress enacted and President Washington approved the proposal in 1791.

Aaron Burr Bio

Aaron Burr, Jr. (1756-1836), was the third vice-president of the United States (1801-1805), and one of the most enigmatic individuals in the eighteenth century.

His father was Aaron Burr Sr, the second president of Princeton University. Aaron Burr Sr. also is my 8th great grandfather. Therefore:

You can call me Aaron Burr, by the way I am dropping Hamiltons.

Burr was also the grandson of Jonathan Edwards, a pastor and theologian. Burr's parents and maternal grandparents died within a year, orphaning, Aaron 2 and his sister 4. Young Burr lived with an austere uncle and did not respond well to the discipline, running away from home several times and attempting to go to sea. Burr entered Princeton at thirteen and graduated with distinction at sixteen.

Burr studied theology and then law. He served in the Revolutionary War, where he earned distinction as a field officer, At the Battle of Monmouth, the British shot Colonel Burr's horse dead, sending Burr tumbling to the ground.

Aaron Burr married the widow Theodosia Prevost in 1782, and adopted her five children. In 1783, they had a daughter, Theodosia Bartow Burr. Both The Burrs had a "passionate commitment to education" and they educated their daughter as any wealthy male child would have been: she could read and write at 3, studied Latin, Greek and French, and had read *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by age 10.^[14] Burr handled more of his daughter's education as Theodosia's health began to deteriorate. Her illness was not a shock – she had been ill as long as they had known each other – but by 1792

she was suffering chronic pain, with doctors' prescriptions doing little to help. Burr offered to resign from the Senate to spend more time with her, but she refused to allow it, and she died on May 28, 1794 at age 48.

John Greenwood, Aaron Burr's former law clerk, gives us additional insight into Burr's personality. He recalled Burr as a good storyteller with few unpleasant memories. A man who would go to great lengths to help a friend. "His manners were cordial and his carriage graceful, and he had a winning smile," said Judge Greenwood. He added "Burr's self-possession under the most trying circumstances was wonderful...he probably never knew what it was to fear a human being."

Burr practiced law in New York City and entered politics. He served as a member of the New York State Assembly, Attorney General of New York, United States Senator and Vice President.

Burr was a masterful politician and had honed his skills in New York politics. Burr and Hamilton became rivals when Burr ran for the U.S Senate against Hamilton's father-in-law, Philip Schuyler in 1791. Burr won the election in the New York state legislature. Burr then became a player in the Democratic-Republican Party in New York while Hamilton was a top rival Federalist Party leader.

In 1800, Burr had amassed enough political capital that Thomas Jefferson's supporters had persuaded him to run for with Jefferson to secure the New York votes in the upcoming Presidential Election.

Presidential Election

Democratic-Republicans, Jefferson and Burr tied in the electoral college for presidency, the decision moved to the House to decide. Burr neither backed away from the opportunity nor did the horse trading for what was necessary to win the presidency. In the house, Hamilton's Federalists would decide the race between Burr and Jefferson. While many of the Federalists had embraced Burr during the house runoff, Alexander Hamilton sought to push them away.

Hamilton had earlier turned on his own party's president, Adams, he began his attack on Burr with a barrage of letters in December of 1800. He writes "There is no circumstance which has occurred in the course of our political affairs that has given me so much pain as the idea that Mr. Burr might be elevated to the presidency by the means of the Federalists". Hamilton did not hold back, "As to *Burr*, there is nothing in his favor. His private character is not defended by his most partial friends. He is bankrupt beyond redemption, except by the plunder of his country. His public principles have no other spring or aim than his own aggrandizement, *per fas aut nefas (by any means good or*

bad). If he can, he will certainly disturb our institutions, to secure himself *permanent power*, and with it *wealth*.”

After 35 deadlocked house votes, Thomas Jefferson cuts a deal with the Federalist to secure the presidency. Hamilton biographer Marie B. Hecht writes : "Although Hamilton had the satisfaction of seeing the less dangerous Republican win the presidency, he was now the quasi-leader of a deposed and divided party. He had, in this election, incurred the enmity of Burr and, more threatening to his political future, of the Adams Federalists.”

When Hamilton worked to elect his brother-in-law as governor of New York in early 1801, Federalists scorned and voters defeated his candidate. Hamilton had lost his political clout.

The political attacks in New York and Washington by Hamilton were not the only conflicts. There was an earlier economic dispute.

Economic Feud

Hamilton had played a major role in founding the Bank of New York and the Bank of the United States, which for a time enjoyed a virtual monopoly. Aaron Burr broke Hamilton's Federalist monopoly by founding the Manhattan Company, the predecessor to today's J.P. Morgan Chase.

Burr led a group of prominent New Yorkers, including Hamilton, in getting a charter from the New York State Legislature for the Manhattan Company to supply "pure and wholesome" water to the residents of New York City.

The Manhattan Company's charter included a clause inserted by Burr allowing the company to use its excess capital in any activity "not inconsistent with the Constitution and laws of the United States." This provision enabled the company to engage in banking activities.

Hamilton was furious. Calling Burr out, he said, *"I have been present when he has contended against banking systems with earnestness and with the same arguments that Jefferson would use... Yet he has lately by a trick established a bank, a perfect monster in its principles, but a very convenient instrument of profit and influence."*

Burr's new Manhattan Company opened in 1799. It sold its shares for \$50, which were within the reach of smaller merchants and professional men who had never been welcome at Hamilton's Federalist banks. Over the next five years, its thriving business also included loans to Burr of more than \$60,000 dollars.

For Burr and Hamilton both, JP Morgan was right when he said "The only way to rob banks is to start one."

The Manhattan company's original directors included Hamilton's brother-in-law, John Barker Church, an Englishman who engaged in speculative enterprises. At a private

directors dinner, Church alleged that Burr had been bribed in connection with a frontier land development.

Church's insult was intentional and given in front of Burr's friends. Burr did not want to duel, but felt required to oblige Church. Church was an experienced dueler, who had already killed a man in England. They fought the duel with Church's pistols. A button was shot off Burr's coat and Church was unharmed.

Hamilton and his Brother in Law John Church had been outwitted to support a competitive bank. This time Church went to his pistols and Hamilton continued his venomous attacks.

The Insult, Honor Challenge and Duel

It was The New York governor's race of 1804, that ended Burr's patience with Hamilton. In that election, Burr who was flexible in his political beliefs dropped the Republicans and ran as an Independent for governor. The prospect of Burr leading New York mortified Hamilton.

In early 1804, Hamilton tried to convince New York Federalists not to support Burr. Although Hamilton's negative campaign was not the deciding factor, the Burr campaign failed and Republican Morgan Lewis won the general election.

The final straw for the Burr-Hamilton conflict was because of an insult during the campaign for governor. In February, 1804, a New York Republican, Dr. Charles D. Cooper, attended a dinner party at which Alexander Hamilton spoke against Burr. Cooper later wrote a letter to Philip Schuyler (Hamilton's father in Law) in which he referenced a "despicable opinion" Hamilton expressed about Burr. Hamilton's assertion that he deemed Burr "despicable," was a term that then implied sexual irregularity. A New York newspaper the "Albany Register" published the letter.

Though Hamilton had said offensive things before, and Burr had accepted his apologies, this time, Burr wrote to a friend, it became impossible for him to retain his self-respect and forbear Hamilton's rude treatment any longer. Burr demanded explanation, Hamilton may have wanted to avoid a duel, but if he admitted to Burr's charge, which was true, he would lose his honor. Either way, his political career would be over.

Before 1804, Hamilton had been involved in ten honor disputes. Most of these challenges never came to firing shots, but one came close: a messy affair of honor with future president James Monroe. In 1792, Monroe, then senator, had made private notes of his investigation into Hamilton, then Secretary of Treasury for corruption, what they had found was misuse of government funds under the ruse of blackmail for adultery. A clerk had leaked Monroe's notes to the press.

Hamilton was infuriated, he went with his brother in law John Church to confront Monroe. When Monroe said he had sealed and sent all of the papers relating to the

investigation to a friend for safekeeping, Hamilton countered that Monroe's assertion was "totally false." Monroe fumed and both men jumped to their feet.

"Do you say I represented falsely, you are a Scoundrel," Monroe charged.

"I will meet you like a Gentleman," Hamilton replied.

"I am ready get your pistols," Monroe retorted.

A flurry of letters followed in which Hamilton demanded Monroe refute the charges and Monroe politely avoided doing so. This wasn't just stubbornness: Monroe still harbored doubts about Hamilton's behavior.

It was Aaron Burr who was convinced the pair should avoid a duel. The men were being "childish," he felt. "The Thing will taken an amicable course," he told Monroe. He worked with the pair as they continued to both write asking whether the other was actually issuing a challenge to a duel. As political historian Joanne Freeman explains it, "the two basically exchanged letters saying: "ready to fight when you are" for an extended period, until each managed to convince himself that the other was the coward."

Perhaps this time with Burr, Hamilton was expecting a similar exchange of letters.

Unfortunately unlike with Monroe, Burr and Hamilton's negotiations went awry and new insults were spawned. Feeling dishonored, Burr demanded that Hamilton apologize for all of his insults.

Hamilton predictably refused. Burr challenged him to a duel, Hamilton accepted the challenge. Their seconds proceeded to plan the pairs pending "interview". On the morning of July 11, 1804. General Alexander Hamilton, and Aaron Burr, Vice President, departed New York by barges with their seconds to Weehawken, NJ. The shots were

fired and one man lay mortally wounded. Their seconds provided an agreed mutual account of the duel, however they did not agree on the intervening time between shots, perhaps this was because of the pistols.

The Dueling Pistols

The Wogdon duelling pistols, were the property of Hamilton's brother in law, John Church. Commissioned by Church in London, the pistols figured prominently in several duels, including the earlier one between Church and Burr over the Manhattan Company, and one involving Hamilton's son Phillip who died in a duel in 1801.

The Church pistols have several unusual characteristics which should have disqualified them for dueling use. They had weighted bronze fore-ends, adjustable front and rear sights, and .54 caliber bore. While some of these features could be found on a cased pair of gentleman's pistols, none of them would appear on a proper set of dueling pistols.

The pistol's greatest advantage was concealed inside with a set trigger setting that gave Hamilton the advantage. The concealed set triggers and knowledge of them would provide a 1 pound trigger pull instead of a 10 lb pull for normal operation. This made for an easy squeeze of the trigger.

Hamilton may have fired too soon because he hit the set trigger accidentally. Andrew Burstein writes, "Hamilton gave himself an unfair advantage in their duel, and got the

worst of it anyway.” Whatever happened with Hamilton’s gun, Burr’s worked the way he wanted, and Hamilton mortally wounded, and died the next day after being transported back to Manhattan.

The Aftermath

In the years following , one of the dueling pistols was converted to percussion from the original flint for use during the Civil War. In 1930, Colonel Church's granddaughter sold the two cased pistols to the Chase Manhattan Bank, the same bank Burr had founded, where they have resided ever since. For the U.S. Bicentennial, David Rockefeller, Chase Chairman of the Board, gave permission to remove the pistols from the vault and have them reproduced. To authenticate the reproduction they had to take the original pistol apart. When they removed the lock from the stock, the long-kept secret of the concealed hair triggers came to light.

The duel ended Burr’s political career. New York and New Jersey charged Burr with murder but he was not brought to trial. When New Jersey persisted in charging Burr with murder, eleven of Burr’s political allies in Congress defended him in print, petitioning New Jersey’s governor to remind him that most political duels weren’t prosecuted, and that “most civilized nations” didn’t consider dueling fatalities “common murders.”

After his term as Vice President ended, Burr never held elective office again but he held much grander designs for the Western Frontier, where westerners appreciated his support against whiskey taxes, against the Spanish and an admiration for a man who would take to the gun to defend his honor, but that, is another story.

A problem in re-telling Burr's side of the story, is that few of his personal papers survive. It is the archive that shapes the story. As opposed to the other Founding Fathers, who left troves of documents—not to mention, as with Hamilton, a widow and children to manage them and help shape the legacy—most of Burr's papers went down at sea, along with his only beloved child, daughter Theodosia, and grandson, in 1813.

In death, Hamilton had left his wife Elizabeth and his family virtually destitute. Eventually, Hamilton's life became portrayed in a popular 21st century musical "Hamilton" by Lin-Manuel Miranda. A form of the Federal Excise Tax on Whiskey, originally proposed by Hamilton, exists today as a burden to distillers and drinkers in our great State.

The closing song of the musical *Hamilton* has the cast asking, "Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?" Perhaps the real drama of the founding era for us today is that, depending on who gets to tell the story first, the heroes and villains are not always whom we'd expect.