

Revolutionary Wrath

*A (Seriously) Biased Revision
of the Burr vs. Hamilton Duel
Based on an Old High-School
Term Paper*

John M. Edwards

John M. Edwards's rogue ancestor, Aaron Burr, shot Alexander Hamilton with a Hoss-pistol from a mere ten paces away—and got away with it. Happening upon Hamilton's gaudy mausoleum in New York City, Edwards says our foppish former Treasury Secretary deserved it!

On the morning of July 11, 1804, two wrathful Revolutionary parties headed for the desolate no-man's land of Weehawken, New Jersey, in separate boats to take part in a classical revenge play.

U.S. Vice-President Aaron Burr had been awakened by his friend John Swartwout, who had found him in a deep slumber. Burr shook the fog from his head and dressed with his usual elegance—black cotton pantaloons and half-boots and a bombazine coat. He met his companions at the foot of Charleton Street on Manhattan Island, and John Gould rowed them across the Hudson to the north side of the beach in Weehawken.

As had been agreed previously, Burr arrived before his enemy, the “Little Lion,” Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton, while a loyal flunky of Burr’s named Van Ness cleared the grounds of underbrush.

The “Deadly Interview” (Colonial American slang for “duel”) was a long time coming, nigh on inevitable, but, dear readers, don’t get impatient: we’ll get to what caused the rift later since we want to get straight to the “action.”

The ground was opposite what is now 42nd Street on a little ledge twenty feet above the river. The celebrity-match duelists were protected from interruption by a sheer cliff above the ledge, making the place inaccessible from above. Nor could the upcoming duel be seen by the hoi polloi from the beach below.

Hamilton’s boat arrived at about 7 A.M., with his second, Pendleton, and Dr. David Hosack. The opponents exchanged formal greetings, ten paces were measured off, and the seconds drew lots to see who would give the word to fire and make the choice of position. Pendleton won both lots.

Pistols loaded, the antagonists took their positions, facing each other as if within a classic Cain versus Abel fable. When Pendleton asked if they were ready, the coward Hamilton, waffling, abruptly cried out, “Stop!”

There was an uncomfortable pause, then Hamilton continued, “In certain states of the light one requires glasses.” He then leveled his pistol in several directions to test the light. Finally, he put on his spectacles and repeated the experiment several times more. Obviously, he was stalling for time. The empirical redcoat sun that never sets frowned down with arched eyebrows on this vile proceeding in the ex-colonies.

Then the word was given and both men presented and fired!

Burr remained erect, but Hamilton raised himself convulsively, staggered, and fell headlong to the ground. Burr had fired with an accuracy that sent his ball into Hamilton’s right side; as the ball struck, Hamilton danced involuntarily on his toes and turned a little to the left, like a Mozart-era Bohemian marionette acting out an epileptic “St. Vitus’s Dance,” at which moment his pistol went off and he fell flat on his face.

Burr started toward his downed foe with a gesture that seemed to Pendleton to express regret, but Van Ness urged Burr to leave the field immediately, so that he wouldn't be recognized by the boatmen or the surgeon, who were already fast approaching.

In his own defense, Burr later dramatically recalled that at the command "Present!" Hamilton greedily took aim and fired promptly. Burr said that he himself fired two or three seconds later and that Hamilton, as he fell, said, "I am a dead man."

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At dusk on the hallowed grounds of Trinity Church on Broadway, opposite Wall Street, in Manhattan, I was blundering around the Revolutionary War-period gravestones, with those cool stylized carved heads adorned by either angel or bat wings, when I landed by chance upon the mausoleum of a rather famous fellow: Alexander Hamilton!

This kind of gave me the creeps since one of my aforesaid familial ancestors had dispatched Hamilton to hell in a historic duel. A paranormal chill crept up my spine like a famished leech. I wondered if Alex was going to rise up from the dead like a bloodsucking freak from *Tales from the Crypt* and throttle me.

Intrigued, I threw myself into research. I began with Gore Vidal's classic *Burr* and then headed on to the so-so library specials. In one amusing tome, the blunt historian began by telling us that Hamilton came from an "illegitimate birth" on the Caribbean island of Nevis, and that his enemies later suggested (falsely) that he had "negroe blood."

Now compare Alex's lowly origins with that of my illustrious patrician relative, Aaron Burr, who was the grandson of none other than the famous theologian and preacher Jonathan Edwards!

Which makes me wonder: Why was the *bâtarde* Hamilton immortalized on our ten-dollar bills, when brave Burr is still relatively obscure to most Americans. He is known mostly for being the most famous U.S. Vice-President in history, which doesn't mean much—right up there, I guess, with Spiro Agnew, Fritz Mondale, and "Lunch" Cheney (whose own version of the duel might be the

convenient “hunting accident”).

But what I liked best about the colorful flamboyant rogue and dandy Aaron Burr is that he came this close to becoming the Emperor of Mexico! Back when the going was good, an adventuresome gentleman orator such as he, relying on divine providence and wearing a powdered wig, with a good steed and sackful of Maderia, could indeed conquer the world—of course, as long as he was a Freemason.

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Alexander Hamilton, proud papa of *The Federalist Papers*, hadn't washed any of his powdered wigs in weeks. He looked like Mad King George on a bad-hair day. Downing a glass of Triangle Trade rum—and another, and another—he stuck his feathered quill into a small bottle of squid ink and began to write a letter with an unsteady but flowery hand. Addressing his son-in-law Charles Cooper, he described Aaron Burr as “the most dangerous man in the community.”

Later, a couple of letters expressing Hamilton's view of Burr somehow found their way into the *Albany Register* of April 24, 1804. This, of course, was not the first time Hamilton had spoken disparagingly of Burr's character, but he had previously expressed his sentiments only in private speech and letters, and as long as they were confidential Burr thought it wiser to ignore them and meet Hamilton with outward courtesy and friendship.

Now, however, Hamilton's private opinion had become public. No longer could it be ignored. By “The Code,” there could be only one answer—a duel!

In early America, the duel was the accepted way for gentlemen to answer real or fancied slights upon their characters. Hamilton had blocked Burr at every turn—in legitimate political controversies and on other occasions not so kosher. The first reaction came on June 18, 1804, when the mysterious Van Ness appeared at Hamilton's door like a forbidding cloaked wraith with a formal communication:

“Sir, I send for your perusal a letter signed Charles D. Cooper, which though apparently published some time ago, has but very recently come to my knowledge. Mr. Van Ness, who does me the favor of delivering this, will point out to you that clause of this letter to which I particularly request your attention. You must perceive, Sir, the necessity of a prompt and unqualified acknowledgment or denial of the use of any expression which would warrant the assertions of M. Cooper.

“I have the honor to be your obedient servant, A. Burr.”

Hamilton replied that the matter “required consideration,” then on June 20, 1804, Hamilton’s lengthy overblown missive arrived. It refused to make “avowal or disavowal,” and proceeded to analyze the offending phrases. He tried to escape the accusation of “more despicable” by saying it admits shades of meaning from “light to dark.” He tried to pass off the comment as within the bounds “admissible between political opponents.”

“I stand ready,” Hamilton at last conceded, “to avow or disavow promptly and explicitly my precise or definite opinion which I may be charged with having declared of any gentleman. . . . I trust, on more reflection, you will see the matter in the same light with me. If not, I can only regret the circumstances and must abide the consequences”—the conventional phrase attesting to a willingness to accept a challenge if and when given.

Burr replied like lightning, in dignified but firm words. He stated that “political opposition can never absolve gentlemen from the necessity of a rigid adherence to all the laws of honour and all the rules of decorum. I neither claim such privilege nor indulge it in others.” Burr’s reply continued thus: “The question is not whether I have understood the meaning of the word (*despicable*) or used it according to syntax and with grammatical accuracy, but whether you have authorized this application, either directly or by uttering expression or opinion derogatory to my honour. Your letter has furnished me with new reasons for requiring a definite reply.”

How stupid could Hamilton be? All he had to do was deny he had used such words, and the duel would never have happened. But he let the opportunity pass. Neither did he bother replying

to the fiery precise prose from his formidable rival. One wonders whether Hamilton thought that by ignoring the problem it would go away. He might have even been in a mild state of shock. This, dear readers, was not very bright. Burr! Cold.

So Burr reacted with a challenge to a duel, which Van Ness delivered to Hamilton with a superior sneer on June 27, 1804. In it, Burr accused Hamilton of “a settled and implacable malevolence, that he will never cease to conduct towards Mr. Burr to violate those courtesies of life.”

The “Fatal Interview,” as duels were sometimes called in those days, was clinched and inescapable: verily, the Talk of the Town, *New Yorker*-style.

But this wasn't just a matter of name-calling.

The Revolutionary wrath of Burr may indeed have been justified. One can't help but wonder, peradventure, if somewhere along the way early on a woman was involved. At every step in Aaron Burr's political career, mean Mr. Hamilton, by direct methods and secret intrigue, was there to trip him up, by opposing him and blocking practically every chance he had to advance himself.

Indeed, it was Hamilton who had exerted his influence on President Washington to reject Burr for Ambassador to France in 1794; it was Hamilton who, as second-in-command of the Continental Army in 1798, refused Burr a military commission; it was Hamilton who during the presidential election of 1800 threw his weight behind Jefferson and condemned Burr as unfit and corrupt; it was Hamilton who turned the tide against him when Burr ran for Governor of New York in 1804; it was Hamilton who for years had written letters denouncing Burr as unqualified and unprincipled.

Without a doubt, these unwarranted attacks ruined Burr's political career and embittered him with “the system.” Burr had every right to give the cruel and vain Mr. Hamilton a drubbing. Whether he had a right to kill him is another matter entirely.

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There was a rumor circulating around (started by yours truly) that the humiliated Hamilton didn't die from the gunshot wound at all,

but was instead sent packing by the powers-that-be to first Europe, then New Zealand, to live out the rest of his sorry life in secret under an assumed name ...

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Bleeding and vomiting profusely, the wounded Mr. Hamilton was transported to New York, where he (supposedly) died after 51 hours of agony at 2 P.M. on July 12, 1804. Bishop Benjamin Moore administered the last rites and later reported that before the final send-off of the soul, the enlightened economic genius rasped, "I have no ill will against Colonel Burr. I met him with a fixed resolution to do him no harm, and I forgive all that happened." Thus ended the life of one of America's greatest statesmen.

Governor Morris delivered his funeral oration to weeping thousands. But in the privacy of his diary he wrote that he would find the proposed address rather difficult, considering Hamilton's illegitimate birth, his vain opinionated character, his advocacy of monarchy (George Washington was "King George" to little old Alex), and so on. To a friend, Morris said, "Colonel Burr ought to be considered in the same light with any other man who has killed another in a duel"—that "in doing justice to the dead" he would not "injure the living."

In his eulogy, Morris spoke of Hamilton's gallantry during the Revolution, his public service and concern for the public welfare, his professional skill and unrivaled eloquence. As to Hamilton's death, Morris obfuscated, "I must not dwell ... Suffer your indignation not to lead to any act which might offend the insulted majesty of law."

But unfortunately there was a massive public outcry against Burr. Wild rumors circulated. In one story Burr was said to have spent the days before the duel in alternating revelry and target-practice. Burr had worn silk on the day of the duel, since that prized material was known to deflect bullets. Hamilton had refused to shrink from the speeding missile. Burr had laughed and rubbed his hands in glee when Hamilton fell, and regretted only that the ball hadn't hit his enemy's heart. In short, it was murder in cold blood.

All over the nation, processions and mass meetings were held

to mourn the departed hero and denounce his killer. Even the Federalists, who had secretly worked against Hamilton, were now loud in their praise of him, especially since he was safely dead. The frenzied populace of New York threatened to burn down the rascal Republican Burr's house around his ears, as they paraded and demonstrated—and shouted out doggerel verse:

*“Oh Burr, oh Burr, what hast thou done?
Thou hast shot dead great Hamilton.
You hid behind a bunch of thistle
And shot him dead with a great Hoss-pistol.”*

An outcast in New York, Burr ran fast to New Jersey, then Philadelphia, and eventually, traveling under the pseudonym “R. King,” he went to Georgia and Florida (then a Spanish possession). He lay low until the furor and uproar subsided, then returned to Washington to serve out the rest of his Vice-Presidency under the scornful eye of President Thomas Jefferson.

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As an interesting aside, dear readers, I offer the fact that both Hamilton and Burr were quite short, about 5'6" standing on their tippytoes for colonial portraitists. According to one airhead historian in my stack of books, in some psychological cases, “small people are known to be overly belligerent and hot-tempered to compensate for their lack of stature.” Would American history have turned out differently if the antagonists of The Duel had been tall? he pontificates. I imagine the historian cited here, who will remain blessedly anonymous, is now safely locked up in a sanatorium somewhere.

* * *

Even as he avoided the consequences of the dastardly duel, Burr was hatching a grand new master plan. In 1803, the size of the United States had nearly doubled with the Louisiana Purchase,

brokered between Jefferson and Napoleon for only several mil. Further expansion was anticipated into the Spanish territories of Florida, Mexico, and even Central and South America.

Burr, now ruined both financially and politically, began to think, with characteristic megalomania, of conquering many of these territories. Burr's exact intentions are not clearly known even today, but apparently he sought British support for an invasion of Mexico. He may have hoped to establish a new empire, installing himself as absolute ruler, in the Spanish territories beyond Louisiana.

Beginning in 1805, Burr traveled extensively trying to rustle up support for a stampede against the Spanish Lands. But the outlaw Burr was instead arrested in Mississippi in 1807 and brought to Richmond, Virginia, to be tried for treason. Burr was in the end acquitted of treason. Once again he had literally gotten away with figurative murder.

Free but deeply disgraced, the mercurial Burr set sail for Europe in 1808, traveling in England, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, and France, before returning to New York just in time for the War of 1812. He resumed his law practice and lived quietly in New York, trying to pay off his immense debts, until his death on Staten Island in 1836.

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Recently I noticed for the first time that the *New York Post*, a piece of trash that I almost never read but used once to clean myself at a Central Park Port-o-Potty, was founded by none other than that scoundrel Alexander Hamilton. Oh, my blanking idol.

I am severely haunted by his august visage almost every day when I pay for corner bodega staples with the legendary bastard emblazoned on the ten-dollar bill. "Here's a Ham!" I flap him face down on the counter like Monopoly money to avoid seeing his self-satisfied and evil smilish grin:

With a cheery Welsh accent I imagine Hammie, lips white worms, whispering with ironic vampiric elan, "I kind of like John Edwards: he sort of stuck up for me, too."

Instead, I glimpse: *In God We Trust*.

EXEUNT

—John M. Edwards

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