



200<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY  
OF THE  
HAMILTON – BURR DUEL  
AT  
WEEHAWKEN

1804 ~ 2004

Pistols at  
Weehawken:

The Hamilton – Burr Duel  
July 11, 1804

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**On July 11, 1804, General Alexander Hamilton and Vice-President Aaron Burr met at Weehawken, New Jersey to settle an “affair of honor.” Burr shot Hamilton that morning, mortally wounding him, and the event may well have changed the history of the United States of America.**

Alexander Hamilton was born in 1755 or 1757, the illegitimate child of a French Huguenot woman of questionable reputation named Rachel Fawcett Lavien and an “impoverished Scotsman” named James Hamilton on the Caribbean island of Nevis. Abandoned by his father at a young age, he rose from poverty to become one of the “Founding Fathers” of the United States.

Aaron Burr was born in 1756 into an aristocratic Newark, New Jersey family of some wealth and privilege – his father was the second president of The College of New Jersey, (later Princeton University). His mother was the daughter of Jonathan Edwards, a famous New England theologian. He lost both parents and grandparents as a toddler and was subsequently raised by his uncle.

The two men had much in common – they were both of a similar height and age; they both served with distinction in the Revolutionary War and both became lawyers, practicing in New York after the revolution. They often appeared as opposing attorneys but, at times, also worked together on cases. Hamilton and Burr held early pro-abolitionist beliefs, although they both owned slaves. However, they had very different political views.

In the mid to late 1780’s there were no real political parties. In the lead-up to the war, there were supporters of the revolution, Whigs, and those against it, Tories, or Loyalists. Afterwards, people with like political philosophies began to coalesce into groups generally led by a charismatic figure. Hamilton was one of the original “Federalists”, who saw the necessity for a strong central government that should be controlled by a “talented few”. As an immigrant, he was more able to see the young nation as a whole than many of his countrymen, who thought of themselves as individuals from a particular state or region. He believed an industry-based economy would strengthen the country and allow it to compete with Europe. He also saw the need for a strong military to defend the fledgling democracy, surrounded as it was by British, French and Spanish colonies.

At the 1787 Continental Congress, Hamilton offered a platform suggesting that state governors would be appointed by the President; the President and Senators would hold office for life; and that Congress would retain exclusive authority to make *all* the laws of the country. The Congress rejected his proposal, but Hamilton did play a central role in crafting the compromises which led to the ultimate ratification of the Constitution. Without his work and writings (especially *The Federalist Papers*, written with contributions from James Madison and John Jay), the United States as we know it may never have existed.

Once George Washington was elected as the first President of the U.S., Hamilton served as his Secretary of the Treasury from 1789-1795. His work in this capacity laid the foundation for the economic strength of the new country. He convinced Congress to pay off its war debts and the states to allow the federal government to assume their debts. By demonstrating Americans' willingness to repay their debts, he made the United States attractive to foreign investors. Hamilton further proposed that the federal government generate revenues through taxes on imports. He also established the first Bank of United States.

Hamilton tended to be rather outspoken and a bit hot-headed, at times openly denouncing his colleagues as scoundrels or rogues when they disagreed with his positions. This got him into trouble with those he criticized and, over the course of his political career; he was involved in 12 “affairs of honor.” Burr even served as the mediator in an incident between James Monroe (the future fifth president of the U.S.) and Hamilton, stepping in to prevent a duel.

By the early 1790's, a new political group was forming in reaction to Federalist policies, fearing that a strong central government was too monarchical and dangerous to the rights of the individual. This concept for the country was based on an agrarian economy of farmers, craftsmen, and small manufacturers, with states rights taking precedence over the national government. These people were called “Republicans” and Thomas Jefferson became their standard bearer.

Aaron Burr gravitated to the “party of the people,” the Republicans, and after serving in the State Assembly and as New York Attorney General, became a U.S. Senator, winning an election against Hamilton's father in law, Phillip Schuyler. Burr was a skillful and charming politician and was able to cultivate Federalists and Republicans alike, much to the distaste of Hamilton, who saw his behavior as unethical and made it his “religious duty” to oppose Burr's career. In 1796, Jefferson asked Burr to be his vice presidential running mate against John Adams, the sitting Vice President and Federalist candidate. They lost, but in 1800 ran again with the same ticket. By now, sentiment against Federalist policies was running high and the Republicans gained control. At this time, according to the Constitution, whoever received the most electoral votes would become president. The candidate with the second highest number of electoral votes would be named Vice President. Both Jefferson and Burr received an equal number (73), throwing the decision into the House of Representatives. Burr refused to get involved in the stalemate, much to the dismay of Jefferson and the New England Federalists, who preferred him to Jefferson. Hamilton used all of his political clout to deny Burr the highest office. Jefferson became president, and, angered at what he saw as Burr's disloyalty, turned against him. He became politically isolated and was rendered ineffectual. The circumstances which led to this tie vote (which took over a week and 36 ballots to break) were remedied by the adoption of the 12<sup>th</sup> amendment in 1804.

In the 1804 election, Burr was dropped from the Republican presidential ticket and decided to run, instead, for the Governor's seat in New York – this time as a Federalist. Hamilton mounted a very public opposition to Burr's candidacy in his party, attacking him on the basis of character both verbally and in print. Burr did not receive the Federalist nomination, ran as an independent, and lost the election. It was as dirty a contest as could be imagined, with personal attacks on Burr from every quarter, Federalist and Republican alike. When the dust cleared, both Hamilton and Burr were out of power and sidelined. In this poisoned atmosphere, Burr came upon an article in an Albany newspaper that spoke of "a more despicable opinion of Colonel Burr" that Alexander Hamilton had expressed. Burr seized on this and demanded that Hamilton retract his attacks. Hamilton refused and the two decided on an "Interview" in Weehawken, the euphemistic term for a duel.

In most cases, the purpose of a duel was to allow the participants to prove that they were willing to die to protect their honor. The disputes were often settled without shots being exchanged, the threat of gunplay being proof enough. However, some duels resulted in bloodshed. In fact, Hamilton's son Philip was killed in an 1801 duel (also in Weehawken and with the same pistols) over an insult to his father.

There is still controversy over what happened that morning in Weehawken. Some say that Hamilton fired into the air, having decided that it would be wrong to shoot Burr. Others contend that Hamilton aimed his pistol at Burr, fired and missed and was then shot down. Hamilton was brought back to New York and died after 36 hours of suffering, leaving his wife and seven children.

Hamilton's death provoked outrage and put the final nail into the coffin of Burr's reputation. He was charged with murder in New York and New Jersey after the duel and fled to Philadelphia and then to the South to avoid arrest. He was indicted for murder, but the charges were later dropped. He served the remainder of his term as Vice President, presiding admirably over the Senate in an important impeachment trial, the outcome of which helped to solidify the power of the judiciary. Burr was later implicated in a still mysterious conspiracy which is believed to have involved the seizure of western or Mexican lands to be ruled by Burr and co-conspirators. The plot was discovered and President Jefferson had Burr arrested in 1807. He was tried for treason and misdemeanors; he was found "not guilty" of the former and acquitted of the latter, due to "lack of evidence". Nonetheless, popular sentiment branded him a traitor, causing him to go into a self-imposed European exile until 1812. Burr died in 1836, having never recovered his honor.

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For more information about the Hamilton – Burr Duel, visit our web site:

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