



**RE-ENACTMENT OF
THE DUEL
BETWEEN
ALEXANDER HAMILTON
&
AARON BURR**

BY
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WEEHAWKEN, NJ

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NARRATOR 1

Thank you. Good morning and welcome to Weehawken. We are now standing on land which was, in 1804, the Hudson River. We believe it is fairly close to the place where Hamilton and Burr met 200 years ago. There is uncertainty as to the exact location of the duel site because the Weehawken waterfront has changed dramatically in the last two centuries. It's hard to imagine this today, but close your eyes for a moment. Imagine, now, what Weehawken was like 200 years ago--an oasis with lush forests and orchards, and clean, fresh air. Imagine, also at this time that New York City was located entirely at the southern end of Manhattan island. The only tall buildings you might see from here were church steeples, down near the Battery. When it was quiet, as it usually was, you would have heard the tolling of the steeple bells.

Why did people come to this beautiful spot to duel? The first thing to understand is that dueling was illegal in New York and in New Jersey. Weehawken was chosen for dueling because there was a natural grassy shelf, large enough for pacing off, that was about 20 feet above the river. It was isolated, heavily wooded and access was difficult, except at low tide. Once the duelers reached the site, their activities could not be seen by the oarsmen or the doctor waiting in the boats. This was important in case they were later called upon to testify in court.

Though the idea of settling political disputes with pistols continues to this day, (although not in duel form), there are some misconceptions about the place of dueling in the culture of the 17 and 1800s. First and foremost, the object was not to kill your opponent. The concept of "honor" was a central part of politics and society. When a man's honor was insulted, the damage to his social, business or political standing could be extreme; dueling was the last step when all other diplomatic attempts failed. In most cases, the very act of requesting or appearing for a duel was enough to prove that you were willing to put your life at risk for "honor." In some cases, disputes were settled on the dueling ground without shots being fired. In others, after a shot or two was exchanged, honor was deemed to have been satisfied. The Hamilton-Burr Duel was shocking at the time, not only because of the stature of the men involved, but also because of its fatal outcome.

NARRATOR 2

There were very few inhabitants in Weehawken at that time. One of the few living in the area was a sea captain, named Deas. He had a home on the cliffs, and, legend goes, if he saw the boats approaching the dueling grounds which were located on his property, he would rush to the site to try to get the combatants to settle their differences without gunfire or bloodshed. As far as we know, 18 duels were fought in Weehawken between 1798 and 1845 and 6 people were killed or died as a result of their wounds.

Here are the facts. On July 11, 1804, General Alexander Hamilton and Colonel Aaron Burr met at Weehawken, New Jersey, to settle an “affair of honor” with pistols. Burr was serving as Vice-President of the United States at the time of the duel. Hamilton’s son, Phillip, had been killed in a duel 2-1/2 years earlier, using the same pistols. Most important, this duel was not a spontaneous response to angry words said in the heat of an argument, but a final reaction to 15 years of sparring between two political foes.

Oddly enough, the opponents had much in common. They were both of a similar height and age, though one was auburn-haired and fair and the other dark; both were avid readers; both served with distinction in the Revolutionary War and both became lawyers, practicing in New York after the revolution. They were charismatic figures in the courtroom and often appeared as opposing attorneys but, at times, worked together on legal cases. Both enjoyed the finer things in life—good food, good wine, sumptuous surroundings and both were considered ladies’ men. They tended to overspend, and often found themselves in financial straits. Hamilton and Burr held early pro-abolitionist beliefs and were dedicated to ending slavery, although they both known to own slaves. How did these two come to face each other on the Weehawken dueling grounds? Their early lives may provide us with some clues.

NARRATOR 1

Alexander Hamilton was born in 1755 on the Caribbean island of Nevis. He was the illegitimate child of a French Huguenot woman named Rachel Fawcett Lavien and James Hamilton, the son of a Scottish nobleman who came to Nevis to try and make his fortune. The family moved to St. Croix; Rachel and her two children, James Jr. and Alexander were later abandoned by their father. Rachel soon succumbed to yellow fever and the boys went to live with a cousin. Alexander was sent to work as a clerk for a merchant named Nicholas Cruger at the age of 13. He so impressed his employer with his mathematical abilities and business acumen, that he was often left in charge of the business. Hamilton was very good at his job, but dreamed of making his mark in the American colonies. With the help of several influential people on the island, Alexander was sent to New Jersey in 1772 for completion of his formal education.

Hamilton traveled to Elizabethtown, (now called Elizabeth) to prepare for college entrance. In 1773, he applied to the College of New Jersey, which later became Princeton University, for advanced placement, but was denied admission. He then applied to King’s College in New York (later Columbia University), where he was accepted. While still at school, he was swept away with revolutionary fervor and became an active patriot, writing his first pamphlet, or polemic in 1775. This was the beginning of a lifelong pattern of setting down his political philosophy to persuade others of the “rightness” of his positions.

Hamilton entered the Revolutionary War as an artillery captain and was soon appointed an aide to General Washington, becoming his most trusted officer. He took part in several important battles, including Princeton, Monmouth and the siege of Yorktown. During winter camp in Morristown, he met and fell in love with Elizabeth Schuyler, daughter of Phillip Schuyler, a wealthy and influential New York landowner from a prominent, old Dutch family. It is remarkable that Schuyler allowed Hamilton, a penniless immigrant without property, to marry his daughter—he obviously saw that Hamilton had the makings of a great and important man. They were married in 1780. “Betsey”, as Hamilton called her early on, was a loving and adoring wife who bore him eight children and lived on after him for another 50 years.

After resigning his commission in 1781 over a dispute with General Washington, Hamilton went to study law in Albany and was accepted to the bar. He quickly established a law practice in New York City in 1782, but soon found himself in the midst of helping to shape the new country’s form of government and was drawn to politics.

NARRATOR 2

Aaron Burr was born in 1756 into an aristocratic Newark, New Jersey family of some wealth and privilege – his father, Aaron Burr Sr. was a pastor and the second president of Princeton University. His mother was the daughter of Jonathan Edwards, a famous New England theologian. He lost both parents and grandparents as a toddler—he and his sister were raised by his uncle Timothy and tutored by Tapping Reeve, who later became his brother-in-law. By the age of 11, he applied to enter Princeton, but was denied entrance because he was so young. He reapplied at the age of 13 and was admitted as a sophomore.

After graduation he remained a year in Elizabethtown, completing a course of reading and further study. As was expected in a family of theologians, he prepared to study for the ministry, but after a year, Aaron realized the life of a clergyman was not for him. He resolved to be a “perfect man of the world,” according to the code of Lord Chesterfield, who wrote, among many other things, “Never seem wiser, nor more learned, than the people you are with. Wear your learning, like your watch, in a private pocket: and do not pull it out and strike it; merely to show that you have one.” This was advice which would serve him well later in his political career.

He decided upon the law and studied with his brother-in-law Tapping Reeve. This study only lasted a year when he decided to join the patriots at the start of the Revolutionary War. Itching for action, he joined Benedict Arnold's expedition to Quebec, comporting himself there with honor under the leadership of General Montgomery. The campaign, however, ended in defeat; when he came back to New York as a major, he became a member of General Washington's staff. From the beginning, neither was comfortable with this arrangement—they developed an almost instant dislike each for the other. After a few weeks, Burr asked to be transferred and was reassigned. The animosity and distrust that Washington felt towards him at this time would prove to be the first in a series of roadblocks to Burr's military and political advancement.

After being reassigned as a Lieutenant Colonel in 1777, Burr was stationed in Orange County, New York. There, he became acquainted with Mrs. Theodosia Prevost, a woman 10 years his senior and the mother of 5 children, married to a British officer who was away serving in the West Indies. She was a very intelligent and accomplished woman who hosted General Washington and other army officers. She and Burr struck up a friendship and began to correspond with each other, discussing everything from poetry to Franklin stoves.

Burr was present, as was Hamilton, at Valley Forge and at the battle of Monmouth. He resigned his commission in 1779, due to illness, but by 1780, resumed his legal studies and 2 years later was admitted to the NY Bar in Albany. He set up legal practice there and immediately married Mrs. Prevost, now a widow, and adopted the children from her previous marriage. They had only 1 child, a daughter, also named Theodosia. The family relocated to New York City in 1783; soon Burr acquired a taste for politics and was lured into the public arena.

NARRATOR 1

In the mid-to-late 1780's, there were no real political parties, as we know them. 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 served as a member of the Continental Congress in the early 1780's and again in 1787, as a delegate to the Philadelphia convention, playing a central role in crafting the compromises which ultimately led to the ratification of the Constitution in 1787. His *Federalist Papers*, written with contributions from James Madison and John Jay, helped to solidify the form of government we know today.

Once George Washington was elected as the first President of the US, Hamilton served as his Secretary of the Treasury from 1789-1795. 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 government generate revenues through taxes on imports and established the U.S. Coastguard to enforce that policy. He was also able to establish the first Bank of the United States and to strengthen the military.

Hamilton resigned his office in 1795 to resume his law practice, but remained a close advisor to Washington until Washington's death in 1799. Except for a stint as inspector-general of the Army (1798-1800) he never again held public office.

Hamilton tended to be rather outspoken and a bit hot-headed, at times openly denouncing his colleagues as scoundrels or rogues in pamphlets, 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 10 "affairs of honor". Burr even served as the mediator in an incident between James Monroe (the future fifth president of the United States) and Hamilton, in which each thought the other had issued a challenge. Burr got the two to reconcile, short of a duel.

NARRATOR 2

In contrast, Burr hardly ever committed his political philosophies or positions to paper. He was able to use his influence behind the scenes, never openly speaking ill of anyone. Politics was a game and "a great deal of fun."—it invigorated him. He was the first politician to be seen actively pursuing political office and the first to develop a "political machine". In the 18th century, it was not considered gentlemanly to look as though you were trying to win votes. Burr was an anomaly.

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, and small manufacturers, with states rights taking precedence over the national government. Thomas Jefferson became the standard bearer for this group, called "Republicans".

Aaron Burr gravitated to the Republicans and served in the New York State Assembly in 1784. He served as New York Attorney General from 1789-1791 and that same year became a U.S. Senator from New York, winning an election against Hamilton's father in law, Phillip Schuyler. Burr was a skillful and charming politician, able to cultivate Federalists and Republicans alike. At times he rallied behind what were considered Federalist issues, 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. Burr promised to deliver New York to the Republicans and did, but Jefferson reneged on reciprocal support. Federalist Adams was elected as President, with Jefferson as Republican Vice President. This occurred because according to the Constitution at this time, whoever received the most electoral votes would become president. The vice president would be chosen by the next highest number of votes. Burr, meanwhile, served 2 more terms in the NY State Assembly. In 1799, he founded the Manhattan Water Company, a private company organized to bring "pure and wholesome water" to New York City. Hamilton approved of the idea and was originally supportive. However, right before it was brought to the floor of the legislature for passage, Burr was able to slip in a clause which allowed the company to use surplus monies for a private banking institution. This was the beginning of what became the Chase Manhattan Bank, now JP Morgan Chase—it was controlled by the Republicans. Burr had outsmarted the Federalists who were in control of the other private money lending institution in New York City, the Bank of New York.

In 1800, Jefferson asked Burr to join him again on the Republican ticket. By now, sentiment against Federalist policies was running high and the Republicans gained control. Hamilton had published a pamphlet which was supposed to go only to certain influential Federalists, declaring John Adams unfit for the office of President. He hoped to reverse the ticket and have Adams' Vice Presidential running mate, Charles Pinckney of South Carolina, become President. Republicans got hold of a copy of the pamphlet and openly published parts of it in the newspapers. Hamilton's efforts were exposed and he was more or less finished with the Federalists.

When the votes were counted, both Jefferson and Burr received an equal number (73), throwing the decision for President into the House of Representatives, as per the Constitution. 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 12th amendment in 1804. Burr refused to get involved in the stalemate. The Federalists preferred him to Jefferson, but wanted certain guarantees which he refused to give. Hamilton used all of his political clout to deny Burr the highest office, but by now the Federalists weren't listening to him. Because of Burr's refusal to play ball with them, the Federalists eventually made a deal with Jefferson, giving him the presidency. Angered at what he saw as Burr's disloyalty, Jefferson turned against him. Burr became politically isolated and ignored.

NARRATOR 1

In the 1804 election, Burr was dropped from the Republican presidential ticket in favor of George Clinton, and decided to run, instead, for the Governor's seat in New York, an election which took place in April – 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. Federalists did not give Burr the nomination so he ran as an independent, and lost. It was as dirty a contest as could be imagined, with personal attacks on Burr from every quarter. Jefferson, allied with Dewitt Clinton (later Mayor and Governor of NY and another Weehawken duelist, as well as nephew of Jefferson's 1804 vice presidential running mate), used his influence to discredit Burr in every possible way. In January of 1804, Clinton's newspaper, *American Citizen* tried to provoke Burr into a duel with Hamilton. In response to this onslaught Burr started his own newspaper, called *The Morning Chronicle*, in which William Van Ness, his friend and associate, attempted to refute the mistruths being published in the *New York Evening Post* (now the NY Post) and *American Citizen*.

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 quoted a Dr. Charles Cooper who referred to a comment Hamilton had made at a dinner party in late March, right before the gubernatorial election. Hamilton said that Burr was a dangerous man who ought not to be trusted with the reins of government. Dr. Cooper then referred to **“a still more despicable opinion of Colonel Burr”** that General Hamilton had expressed to him. Burr's reputation had suffered greatly both from losing the election and the attacks to his character. Defeated and politically estranged from both the Federalists and the Republican Party he had nurtured, Burr was shown this article in mid-June and almost immediately decided upon his course. A challenge to a duel with the man who had been assailing him for 15 years might be just the thing to help him regain his honor and political power.

The following four letters which passed between Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton were the opening rounds which culminated in gunfire in the “Interview in Weehawken”. They are written according to the ritualistic format demanded by an “affair of honor”

The first letter from Burr, dated June 18th is addressed to General Hamilton and is as follows:

NARRATOR 2

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 to deliver this, will point out to you that clause of the 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 expressions which could warrant the assertions of Dr. Cooper.

I have the honor to be Your Obedient Servant, A. Burr
William P. Van Ness, Burr’s close associate, delivered the letter to Hamilton that same day. This was also according to the duel ritual; principals did not deliver these letters themselves. Hamilton read the note and the newspaper article to which it referred and said that he needed some time to reflect. He said that he would have a letter in response to Colonel Burr’s by June 20th.

Here are excerpts from his response:

NARRATOR 1

Sir,

I have maturely reflected on the subject of your letter of the 18th instant; and the more I have reflected the more I have become convinced, that I could not, without manifest impropriety, make the avowal or disavowal which you seem to think necessary.

The clause pointed out by Mr. Van Ness is in these terms, “I could detail to you a still more despicable opinion, which General Hamilton has expressed of Mr. Burr.” ...I was obliged to seek the opinion to which it referred. I found it in these words “General Hamilton and Judge Kent have declared, in substance, that they looked upon Mr. Burr to be a dangerous man, and one who ought not to be trusted with the reins of Government.” The language of Dr. Cooper plainly implies, that he considered this opinion of you, which he attributes to me, as a despicable one; but he affirms that I have expressed some other still more despicable; without however mentioning to whom, when, or where. ‘Tis evident, that the phrase “still more despicable” admits of infinite shades, from very light to very dark. How am I to judge of the degree intended?... Between Gentlemen, despicable and more despicable are not worth the pains of a distinction....

I cannot reconcile it with propriety to make the acknowledgement, or denial, you desire, I will add, that I deem it inadmissible, on principle, to consent to be interrogated as to the justness of the inferences, which may be drawn by others, from whatever I may have said of a political opponent in the course of a fifteen years competition...

I stand ready to avow or disavow promptly and explicitly any 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 circumstance, and must abide the consequences....

I have the honor to be Sir
Your obed. Svt.
A. Hamilton

This letter was delivered to Burr on the morning of June 21st. By the evening, the following letter was ready for delivery to Hamilton.

NARRATOR 2

Sir,

Your letter of the 20th instant has been this day received. Having Considered it attentively I regret to find in it nothing of that sincerity and delicacy which you profess to Value.

Political opposition can never absolve Gentlemen from the Necessity of a rigid adherence to the laws of honor and the rules of decorum. I neither claim such privilege nor indulge it in others.

The Common sense of Mankind affixes to the epithet adopted by Dr. Cooper the idea of dishonor: it has been publicly applied to me under the sanction of your Name. The question is not whether he has understood the Meaning of the word or has used it according the syntax and with grammatical accuracy, but whether you have authorized their application either directly or by uttering expressions or opinions derogatory to my honor. The time “when” is in your own knowledge, but no way material to me, as the Calumny has now first been disclosed so as to become the subject of my Notice, and as the effect is present and palpable.

Your letter has furnished me with new reasons for requiring a definite reply.

I have the honor to be Sir Your Obdt. St.
A. Burr

According to Van Ness, Hamilton received this letter from him on June 22nd and remarked that it was “ a letter such as he had hoped not to have received, that it contained several offensive expressions and seemed to close the door to all further reply.....” At this point, Hamilton showed the letters to his friend, Nathaniel Pendleton who was to act as his second. Van Ness understood from these comments, that there were to be no more exchanges, other than those preparatory to setting time and place for the duel.

However, Hamilton did write a reply to Burr. This letter, dated June 22nd was actually not delivered until June 25th.

NARRATOR 1

Sir,

Your first letter, in a style too peremptory, made a demand, in my opinion, unprecedented and unwarrantable. My answer, pointing out the embarrassment, gave you an opportunity to take a less exceptionable course. You have not chosen to do it, but by your last letter, received this day, containing expressions indecorous and improper, you have increased the difficulties to explanation, intrinsically incident to the nature of your application.

If by a “definite reply” you mean the direct avowal or disavowal required in your first letter, I have no other answer to give than that which has already been given. If you mean any thing different admitting of greater latitude, it is requisite you should explain.

I have the honor to be Sir Your obed. Servt.
A. Hamilton

As you can hear, they had reached an impasse, and despite the efforts of Van Ness and Pendleton, decided upon their “Interview”, set for Wednesday, July 11th.

Let’s leave these two men to their preparations and talk a little about dueling.

The word ‘duel’ comes from the Latin terms for war and two, **bellum** and **duo**, or “war between two”. The custom developed in medieval times and was practiced all over Europe as well as in England and Ireland. In fact, dueling was so common in Ireland that, in 1777, a code of conduct was developed called the Code Duello, its purpose being to codify the terms of engagement. It consisted of a series of 25 rules that were to be explicitly followed, unless changes were agreed upon by the seconds of each party.

Not all gentlemen took part in duels; many believed it was an evil custom. As a young man, George Washington was involved in a political argument which might easily have led to a duel. He was knocked down with a club and wrote to the offender to meet him at a tavern. The man arrived prepared for a duel and found Washington at the table with a bottle of wine, instead of pistols. The matter was settled with a handshake. Another founding father, Ben Franklin, said duels “were a murderous practice...they decide nothing.” The churches were also vehemently opposed to dueling and sermons were often preached against the practice. Unfortunately, many gentlemen of the upper class felt it a duty to respond with a duel challenge when their honor was assailed.

NARRATOR 2

Here is the gist of the rules:

“In a typical duel, each party acted through a friend, or second. The seconds' duty, above all, was to try to reconcile the parties without violence. An offended party sent a challenge through his second. If the recipient apologized, the matter usually ended. If he elected to fight, the recipient chose the weapons and the time and place of the encounter. Up until combat began, apologies could be given and the duel stopped. After combat began, it could be stopped at any point after honor had been satisfied.”¹

The chance of dying in a pistol duel was relatively slim; only about 20% of duelists ever were injured and those that were, often received their injuries in the leg. And, even in the hands of an experienced shooter, accuracy was difficult. Generally, pistols had to be discharged within three seconds; to take aim for a longer time period was considered dishonorable.

Regarding the pistols: those we are using today are replicas of the originals used in this duel and, we believe, in 2 earlier duels. They may have been used first in 1799, in a duel between Burr and Hamilton’s brother-in-law, John Church, the owner of the pistols—the outcome was a button shot off of Burr’s coat. The second time was in 1801, in a duel between Hamilton’s oldest son, Philip, and George Eacker, a Jefferson supporter,—Philip was mortally injured and died the next day.

(Burr and Van Ness begin walking toward the platform from boat area)

These pistols, made in London by a famed gun maker, Robert Wogdon, were actually larger than typical .50 caliber dueling pistols. Wogdon’s were considered the best because of their accuracy; they had longer and thicker barrels which made them heavier and easier to shoot and they came with aiming sights, not generally allowed in dueling pistols. Many pistols in the late 18th century, including these, had a hair or set trigger so that only the lightest touch was needed to fire the shot. The user only had to push the trigger forward to engage the hair trigger. This meant that if the hair-trigger was set, it would require a half of a pound of pressure to fire rather than the usual 10 or 12 pounds, giving the user an advantage of ease of fire, but likely to cause inaccurate or premature firing.

It was discovered in 1975, on the pistols being taken apart to have replicas made for the bicentennial, that there was a hidden hair trigger mechanism. Most single set triggers have the adjusting screw on the outside of the gun, behind the trigger. Wogdon, however, had made all of his dueling pistols with the adjustment mechanism inside the gun works.

(Hamilton and Pendleton begin walking toward the platform.)

NARRATOR 1

In preparation for the duel, both Hamilton and Burr had written wills and letters to their loved ones. Hamilton wrote to his wife Eliza on July 4th, hoping that she would forgive the choice he felt compelled to make to protect his honor. “Adieu best of wives and best of Women. Embrace all my darling Children for me. Ever yours, AH. He also wrote a statement on the day before the duel, called his “apologia”, saying that he was morally opposed to dueling on religious grounds, but due to the nature of the challenge, he couldn’t refuse....if he were to be useful in the future to the country, he had to meet Burr’s challenge and that he planned to withhold his first fire, hoping to give Burr time to reconsider. These words, written for posterity and published in the newspapers just days after the duel, helped to seal Burr’s fate as a murderer.

To quote Joanne Freeman, a Hamilton scholar, “Hamilton depicted himself as an exemplary duelist, compelled to right, unwilling to kill, gaining nothing, sacrificing all. There was no more effective way to prove oneself a martyr and to prove one's foe, by default, a fiend.”²

NARRATOR 2

Burr wrote to his daughter, Theodosia (his wife having died of cancer 10 years earlier), directing her how to dispose of certain of his personal effects and closed his letter to her, saying “You have completely satisfied all that my heart and affections have hoped or even wished...Let your son have occasion to be proud that he had a mother. Adieu.”

NARRATOR 2

On the morning of July 11, 1804, Burr and his second, William Van Ness, left his home at Richmond Hill in lower Manhattan at about 5:30AM to row the 3 miles to the dueling grounds. By previous agreement between the seconds, they were to arrive first. They removed their coats, as it was already warm, and began to clear the area of tree limbs, brush and stones.

At a few minutes before 7 AM, Hamilton and his second, Nathaniel Pendleton arrived, along with Dr. Hosack, who remained near the boat, on-call.

Events proceeded according to the format of the *code duello*. After Hamilton and Burr formally greeted each other...

AARON BURR (AB)

Good morning General Hamilton...(AB bows.)

ALEXANDER HAMILTON (AH)

Good morning Colonel Burr. (AH bows.)

(Burr strolls towards the cliff, Hamilton towards the river – they both look out while seconds measure.)

NARRATOR 1

The seconds measured the distance, 10 full paces and placed wooden posts as markers.

(Van Ness places a wooden post at river side, then measures 10 paces and Pendleton places another post.)

Then they cast lots for the choice of position and also to determine by whom the word “present” should be given. Both tosses were won by Pendleton.

(During the narration, Pendleton, representing the challenged party, removes dice from the pistol case, and shakes dice.)

PENDLETON

Mine. *(Shakes dice again.)* Mine again. *(Replaces dice in pistol case.)* General Hamilton, please choose your position.

AH

I will face toward the river.

PENDLETON

General Hamilton, please take your position. *(Hamilton walks to the cliff side of platform)*
Colonel Burr, please take your position. *(Burr walks to the river side of platform)*

NARRATOR 1

The seconds then proceeded to load the pistols in each others’ presence with a “smooth ball.” Burr was offered first choice of pistols, as the injured party.

(The pistols have already been loaded, Van Ness and Pendleton mime loading, tamping, etc. Van Ness approaches Burr with the set of pistols.)

VAN NESS

Your choice of pistols, Colonel Burr.

(Burr chooses one. Van Ness gives the case back to Pendleton who approaches Hamilton)

NARRATOR 1

At this point, Pendleton whispered to Hamilton, "Should I set the hair-trigger?" Hamilton responded: "Not this time."

(During this narration, Pendleton leans in to Hamilton to mime asking the question, Hamilton shakes his head, no.)

Duelists would position themselves in a certain way to present the smallest amount of body surface as possible to the opponent. This involved placing the right foot about 26 inches in front of the left foot, the face over the right shoulder, stomach sucked in, and the right thigh and leg in front of the left leg. The pistol was held somewhat to the left, where it could deflect a bullet. The arm not holding the pistol would be held behind the back.

(During this description, AH and AB assume the dueling stance.)

PENDLETON

Now that you have taken your stations, I will explain the rules of engagement. I shall ask the parties whether they are ready, when you both answer in the affirmative, I shall say "present" after which you may fire when you please. If one fires before the other, the opposite second shall say one, two, three, fire.... And the party shall then fire or lose his fire.

General Hamilton, are you ready?

AH

(raises his pistol as if to try the light, and lowering it) I beg pardon for delaying you but the direction of the light renders it necessary.... (He pulls out his spectacles from his pocket with his left hand, and puts them on.)

PENDLETON

Are you ready sir?

AH

Yes I am.

PENDLETON

Colonel Burr, are you ready?

AB

Yes, I am.

(Both men take the dueling stance. They raise their pistols.)

PENDLETON

Present!

(At this, both men start to lower their guns and fire within a few seconds of each other. Hamilton's gun doesn't lower all of the way, he fires on an upward angle, above Burr's head. Burr levels his pistol down to Hamilton and fires. Hamilton drops to one knee.)

NARRATOR 2

Hamilton had been hit. The bullet had penetrated his right side a little above the hip, torn through his liver and diaphragm, and lodged in his vertebrae.

(Action simultaneous with narration: Burr moves toward Hamilton, Van Ness pulls him away and down steps, opens umbrella, they walk briskly towards boat. Dr. Hosack and 2 bargemen approach. Hosack goes up on platform to Hamilton, checks him for pulse, etc. Bargemen remain near set of steps.)

Burr started towards Hamilton with an expression of regret, but didn't speak, and Van Ness quickly pulled him away from the field and down towards the boat, shielding him with an umbrella so as not to be recognized by the bargemen or the doctor who, having been called by Pendleton, were approaching. They boarded their boat and immediately returned home.

When the seconds were asked to record their statements of what had occurred, they agreed on everything up to the point of the firing of the shots. Pendleton was certain that Hamilton did not shoot first and that if his gun went off, it was an involuntary reaction to the fire he received from Burr. Pendleton knew of Hamilton's decision to hold his first fire or to fire into the air. He was so sure that Hamilton did not fire at Burr that he went back to Weehawken 2 days later and found the path of the ball which had passed through the limb of a cedar tree, about 7 feet above and 4 feet wide of where Burr had stood. The branch was cut off and brought back to New York as his proof.

*(Dr. Hosack makes his way down the river side steps and goes to the north side podium--
Narrator 2)*

William Van Ness was equally certain that Hamilton had fired first and that Colonel Burr fired immediately after, only five or six seconds of time intervening. He noticed that upon seeing Hamilton's gun discharge, he looked directly at Colonel Burr to see if he was hurt, saw Burr start or flinch, and then saw Burr's pistol discharge.

Dr. Hosack will continue with his narrative.

DR. HOSACK

When called to him, I found him half sitting on the ground supported in the arms of Mr. Pendleton. His countenance of death I shall never forget. He had at that instant just strength to say, "This is a mortal wound, Doctor"; when he sank away and became to all appearances lifeless. I immediately stripped up his clothes, and ascertained that the direction of the ball must have been through some vital part. His pulses were not to be felt; I considered him as irrecoverably gone.

I thought the only chance for his reviving was to get him upon the water. We carried him out of the wood to the bank, and we immediately put off. I rubbed his face, lips and temples with spirits of Hartshorne....When we had got about fifty yards from the shore, he sighed and breathed, and said, "My vision is indistinct." His pulse became more perceptible; his respiration more regular; his sight returned. He happened to cast his eye upon the case of pistols, and observing the one that he had had lying on the outside, said "take care of that pistol; it is undischarged and still cocked; it may go off and do harm. Pendleton knows that I did not intend to fire at him." Pendleton stated that he had already made me aware of it.

He closed his eyes and remained calm for the rest of the journey, stating that his lower extremities had lost all feeling, that he entertained no hopes that he should long survive. He asked that Mrs. Hamilton be sent for.

(Bargemen go up to platform and help Pendleton support Hamilton down steps as they slowly walk toward the boats. Hosack steps away from microphone, but remains next to podium.)

We conveyed him to a friend's home on Jane Street and tried to make him comfortable in a darkened room. I gave him a large anodyne, which I frequently repeated, and laudanum to help the pain, but I had not the shadow of a hope of his recovery. I called for Dr. Post to come and he was united with me in this opinion. French surgeons were sent for, since they had much experience in gun-shot wounds; but they confirmed Dr. Post's and my opinion. During the night he had some imperfect sleep; in the morning his symptoms were aggravated, but with a diminution of pain. He spoke often of "My beloved wife and children." At about 2 o'clock, he expired.

MOMENT OF SILENCE

NARRATOR 1

Alexander Hamilton's funeral was held on July 14th; a solemn procession that moved along Broadway to Trinity Church, with Hamilton's family and friends, the military, members of the Society of Cincinnati, the St. Andrews Society, students of Columbia College, members of the Mechanics Society, the NY Bar and the general populace from all over the city assembled. Gouverneur Morris, a longtime friend of Hamilton and fellow Federalist, delivered the eulogy to the crowd. The bells in the church tower tolled continually, along with the ceremonial firing of guns from British and French ships in the harbor during the funeral services.

NARRATOR 2

The shock of Hamilton's death, as one of the founding fathers and Federalist political leader, aroused new reactions against dueling. Dr. Timothy Dwight, president of Yale wrote, "Dueling is a great national sin. With the exception of a small section of the Union, the whole land is defiled with blood." Charles Pinckney, a Southerner, wrote, "Dueling is no criterion of bravery. I have seen cowards fight duels, and I am convinced real courage may be better shown in the refusal than in the acceptance of a challenge." These outcries gradually helped start to sound the death knell for dueling, at least in the northern states, though it took another 40 years for the practice to be entirely finished in Weehawken.

As for Aaron Burr, the murder indictments against him in New York and New Jersey forced him to flee. He traveled to Philadelphia, then south, and stayed with his daughter and son-in-law in South Carolina, until the furor over Hamilton's death abated. He returned to Washington to serve out the remainder of his Vice Presidency, presiding with honor over a judicial impeachment hearing in the Senate. He then went on to be involved in a somewhat mysterious conspiracy in the western states for which he was tried for treason and acquitted. He fled the United States, lived in Europe for several years, and then returned to New York to resume his law practice. He never was able to recover his reputation or political standing and lived on until 1836, a full 32 years after the infamous duel.

THE END

NOTES

1. PBS Website, The American Experience: The Duel, The History of Dueling in America.
2. Freeman, Joanne B. “Dueling as Politics: Reinterpreting the Burr-Hamilton Duel.” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 53, no. 2, April 1996.

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New Jersey Historical Society

Aaron Burr Papers
William Patterson Family Papers
Stevens Family Papers

Jersey City Free Public Library

The Jersey Room - miscellaneous news articles

The New York Public Library

Map Room – early maps of Hudson River, New York City and Environs

The New-York Historical Society

Aaron Burr Papers
Alexander Hamilton Papers
William P. Van Ness Papers
Nathaniel Pendleton Papers