**Aaron Burr: Faux Founder or Fallen Figure**

**Presented by Todd Maxwell Pelfrey**

**Quest Club, February 16, 2024**

Throughout the legends of the revolutionary generation, nudging the heavenly bodies of America's founding fathers broods an enigmatic Black Hole, the celestial personification of Aaron Burr. For two centuries, popular narratives portrayed a narcissistic, bloodthirsty, and traitorous rouge who instigated the country's first Constitutional crisis, murdered Washington's angelic successor, and conspired to sunder the young republic into a new kingdom as Aaron I. None of those tales are supported by historical records, but rather were spawned by political enemies then propagated through the ages by passé tropes and sloppy histories.

The documented figure is far more fascinating than his puckish myth, and modern research has uncovered an authentic, humanized, and commendable visionary. President John Adams even believed "if American history was ever to be understood or related with truth" Aaron Burr needed to be "explained."[1] Exploring this complicated character and his misshapen legacy, shows more than just the damn fool that shot Hamilton, but a tragic embodiment of our nation's earliest struggles to balance independence with expansion, and unity with identity.

On February 6, 1756, in Newark in the British Province of New Jersey, Aaron Burr was born into an aristocratic and deeply religious family. His father Aaron Burr, Sr., was president of the College of New Jersey, later Princeton University, and his mother Ester was the daughter of Jonathan Edwards, a luminary of the First Great Awakening. Calamity arrived swiftly as Aaron was orphaned at the age of two and taken in by his uncle, where the abuse was so harsh he frequently ran away. Seeing escape through higher education, he applied to Princeton when he

was only 11, was accepted two years later and graduated at 16. His undergraduate years nurtured ideals of ambition and honor, as well as a budding desire for provincial autonomy. He dawdled in seminary then moved to Connecticut to study under his brother-in-law Tapping Reeve, the founder of Litchfield Law School.

When war with Great Britain erupted in 1775, the nineteen-year-old joined the ill-fated invasion of Quebec, embarking that fall on an arduous, two-month wilderness trek led by Colonel Benedict Arnold. On December 31st, Burr volunteered for the vanguard of a hasty assault on Quebec City during a blinding nor-easter. In his first combat, torrents of musket and grapeshot decimated the attacking rebels, including their General Richard Montgomery. Having miraculously survived, Burr crept back to the battlefield that evening and singlehandedly attempted to retrieve his leader's body. His bravery was "praised in every man's mouth" and he emerged from the disaster a veritable hero.[2]

His fame garnered an assignment to General George Washington's staff; however, he detested the other officers' skullduggery and requested transfer after six weeks. As aid to General Israel Putnam he was lauded for rescuing hundreds of comrades during the British capture of Long Island in August 1776. But he refused to pander and was overlooked so often he traded barbs with Washington, beginning their decades-long quarrel. In 1777, he was finally promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel, but was banished to the Ramapo Mountains. After rejoining the Continental Army at Valley Forge, Burr valiantly commanded during the brutal Battle of Monmouth in New Jersey on June 28, 1778. Fighting in 100-degree temperatures, he suffered exhaustion and heatstroke so severe he experienced lifelong reoccurrences.

The American troops withdrew to The Hermitage, the estate of Theodosia Prevost, a staunch patriot and independent matron. She and the ailing colonel were mutually smitten and

although she was legally married to an estranged British officer, had five children and was ten years his senior, their sentiments flourished as he convalesced in her home. His final post was in Westchester County, New York, an espionage-soaked region that taught him to gauge and inventory citizen allegiances, skills he would later use to elevate the nation's second political party. He resigned his commission in 1779, leaving the service disillusioned, yet enthusiastic for his next stanza.

Burr returned to Litchfield to study law and passed the New York bar in 1782. That year he and a recently widowed Theodosia were married, and soon had two children, with their eldest, also named Theodosia, surviving to adulthood. Their daughter was their greatest endeavor and one of the best educated women in the nation. She married Joseph Alston of South Carolina and Burr's only acknowledged grandchild, Aaron Burr Alston, was born to the couple.

His early legal career cultivated his civic underpinnings, heavily inspired by the Enlightenment and its emphasis on reason, justice, and civility. He also devoted to Utilitarianism, a philosophy that encouraged governments to provide happiness for the greatest number of citizens. More controversially, he became one of the country's strongest advocates for women's rights and gender equality, sentiments discouraged by his colleagues. As clunky as it strikes contemporary ears, Burr passionately argued his wife and daughter proved that women had the same intellectual capabilities as men, and these three are recognized amongst the first American protofeminists. Despite his unique beliefs, Burr's critics regurgitated mistruths that he stood for nothing, and refused to take public stances, but those slights ignore 15 well-documented years as state assemblyman, United States Senator, and New York Attorney General.

In 1784, Burr began his Icarian public life when first elected to the New York general assembly. He wrote groundbreaking legislation for the immediate emancipation of all enslaved individuals, the first such law proposed in the state. It was solidly voted down, and later drafts would not be enacted for 42 years. Undeterred, he then unsuccessfully promoted women's suffrage, which would not be granted for a staggering 132 years. As a lawmaker he also fiercely defended the rights of foreign-born residents, practitioners of diverse faiths, and free persons of color. This advocacy led one author to observe "Burr may be the only Founding Father who wouldn't be baffled or outraged by America as we know it today, in which all citizens have an equal vote."[3]

As state and national politics coalesced into a two-party system, Burr entered the orbits of his two deepest frenemies: New York's Alexander Hamilton and his Federalist Party, and Virginia's Thomas Jefferson and his Democratic-Republican Party. Although ostensibly a Republican, Burr was frequently "out of harmony with the principles of that party" as one of the nation's original bipartisan public servants.[4] This nonconformity excited his backers the Burrites, who were the first truly democratic, non-nepotistic political entity in New York, and occasionally flexed as a viable party.

As he gained national sway, being in the room where it happens, also brought skirmishes with his main adversary. After he was named state attorney general in 1789, Burr suggested a bevy of humane reforms to the penal code, but Hamilton led the Federalist supermajority to roundly reject those recommendations for being "too 'unprejudiced'."[5] The frosty relationship exploded in 1791 when Burr unseated Hamilton's father-in-law Philip Schuyler as Senator from New York and then simmered the hostility by representing Hamilton's former lover Mariah Reynolds in her divorce.

In the Senate, Burr's commitment to peaceful diplomacy with Native Americans directly shaped the area that would become Fort Wayne. In 1792, after Chief Little Turtle's Miami Confederacy twice defeated the United States Army, President Washington ordered devastating retaliation. "Alone among the founders, Burr had Indian friends," and he blocked the legislation so that allied Iroquois nations could mediate with the western tribes.[6] Those alternatives were ultimately disregarded as the army swelled into General Anthony Wayne's Legion of the United States and its conquest of the Northwest Territory.

Just when his influence ballooned to unexpected magnitudes, Burr's beloved wife died in 1794 and he lost both his spouse and best political ally. Shortly afterwards, the next presidential election awkwardly yielded a president and vice president from different parties, with Jefferson coming within a hairsbreadth of the Presidency, but losing New York to Federalist John Adams. An upstart Aaron Burr finished fourth in the 1796 electoral votes, but would steer the results very differently four years later.

With Schuyler retaking his seat in 1797, Burr returned to the New York general assembly as international tensions grew dire. While defending immigrants from aggressive legislation, ultra-radical Federalists branded him anti-American, a description that would forever linger, and Hamilton personally stymied his revived military aspirations. Not that the freshly unretired General Washington needed much convincing, judging the colonel a "brave and capable officer; but the question is, whether he has not equal talents at intrigue."[7] Washington astutely sensed deception, since Burr's 1799 foray into the drinking water business was his zaniest. Awarded a rare state charter to deliver clean water to New York City, he secretly inserted a loophole to use "surplus capital…in any other monied transaction of operation."[8] "The Great Water Hoax" befell his Manhattan Company as a perpetually chartered bank masquerading as a water

company that survives today as JP Morgan Chase.[9] His constituents bristled at the duplicity and never elected Burr to another state office, but he soon had much greater ambitions.

For the state election of 1800, Burr implemented a forgotten provision that allowed tenants to circumvent strict property ownership voting requirements by pooling their holdings into qualifying assets. This added two districts in working-class wards in New York City, which reciprocated their newfound suffrage by leaning Republican. Burr then zealously engaged the electorate by profiling voters, actively stumping, and transporting friendly balloters to the polls. His efforts flipped the state legislature and electoral body to Republican control, which would decide the next presidential election.

"As America's first unabashed professional politician," Burr called the election process "a great deal of fun and honor and profit," but his aggressive campaigning unsettled both parties.[10] Federalists and Republicans alike were intimidated by broader suffrage, and especially feared the newly enfranchised might run for office themselves. Although Jefferson publicly shunned electioneering, he needed those novel techniques to win, and declared Burr his running mate as well as their campaign manager. The presidential election of 1800 was virtually identical to the previous, except for New York which handed the presidency to the Republicans, but a clash from within endangered the first peaceful transition of power in only its fourth cycle.

For presidential elections, each elector cast two votes and whichever candidate received the most would be president and the second most would be vice president; however, the framers prescribed no way to delineate votes between running mates. The Republican voting strategy created an unintended crisis by inducing each of its 73 electors to parallel the party line, tying with 73 votes for Thomas Jefferson and 73 votes for Aaron Burr. Instantly, Burr repeated his endorsement of Jefferson, attesting "every Man who knows me ought to know that I should

utterly disclaim all competition" for the presidency.[11] However, when Republican officials prodded him to say he was unworthy of the office, Burr balked at the self-deprecating statement and that defiance obliterated his political future.

The decision went to the House of Representatives, where Federalists held the burden of selecting between two candidates they disliked. The stalemate generated 35 consecutive tie votes and as inauguration day tensely approached, both Pennsylvania and Virginia deployed their militias in fear of civil war. Finally, Federalist James Bayard offered Burr the presidency if he made certain cessions that contradicted his more Republican policies. Bayard then dismayed "(t)he means existed of electing Burr (president), but they required his cooperation," which he did not give.[12] The deal was then extended to Jefferson, who accepted it to become our 3rd President on the House's 36th vote. In retribution, he announced a different running mate for his next campaign and cast Burr into a purgatorial vice presidency.

Abandoned by his party and without national prospects, Burr entered the 1804 New York gubernatorial election and was again courted by influential Federalists. If he favored New England's secession into an autonomous country, the cabal promised him not only a governorship, but its founding presidency. He vigorously declined, and it cost him the race. He later heard of Hamilton's clandestine attacks during that campaign, denouncing him as "a dangerous man, and one who ought not to be trusted with the reins of government."[13] After enduring years of defamation, Burr furiously demanded an explanation, which escalated an exchange so grave that compensation could only be found on the dueling field.

In the early 19th century, the *code duello* was an arrangement of highly choreographed formalities that regulated contests of honor, which usually ended without casualty. Burr had done so once by harmlessly trading shots with Alexander's brother-in-law five years prior, but

the more combustible Hamilton had entered such affairs on eleven occasions. Because dueling was illegal in New York and nearly everything was legal in New Jersey, the "Interview at Weehawken" began in the early morning of July 11, 1804 on the notorious grounds across the Hudson River. Despite Hamilton's undisclosed pledge that he would not shoot at Burr, he made three extremely antagonistic decisions. First, he positioned his challenger in the more hazardous location, then donned his spectacles for better aim, and finally practiced aiming his loaded weapon at his opponent.

At the signal of "present," Hamilton fired directly at Burr, close enough that he felt the bullet pass his ear and strike a nearby tree. The lethal intent startled him, but after the powder smoke dissipated, he returned fire deliberately pointing low and away from his adversary's head and vital organs. The bullet struck Hamilton just above the hip, then ripped through his lower abdomen and spine in a wound that was obviously fatal. Hamilton's apotheosis occurred the following afternoon and his killer was eternally demonized. Charged with murder in New Jersey and New York, Burr is also the only person in New York history to be indicted for arranging a duel. He fled to Washington, D.C., where he incongruently stewarded an unprecedented legal proceeding.

In 1805, Associate Justice Samuel Chase faced eight partisan articles of impeachment for high crimes and misdemeanors because the Federalist judge criticized the Jefferson administration as a "mobocracy." The embattled Vice President understood the importance of keeping impeachment as an apolitical course, despite Republican pressure. When Chase was acquitted, both parties applauded Burr for diffusing what could have set a risky precedent of lobbing impeachments over petty disagreements.

One of his last responsibilities as President of the Senate was to read the results of the victorious Republican presidential ballot, naming George Clinton the new Vice President. Barred from practicing law in New York or New Jersey, he retreated to Philadelphia where his story takes a surprising tangent, as Aaron Burr calculated the most adventurous phase of his career with eyes to the southwest.

Misleadingly dubbed the "Burr Conspiracy," the ex-vice president developed a multifaceted campaign of several interrelated options for speculating and settling in the American west. His most daring goals were to obtain lands for the United States from Spanish colonies in West Florida and Mexico through the method of filibustering. After the Neutrality Act of 1794 a filibuster was a legal military excursion privately performed by an American citizen against a foreign power that was at war with the country.

His primary partner in this southwest venture was General James Wilkinson, whom Theodore Roosevelt deemed "the most despicable character in American history."[14] Wilkinson was Governor of Louisiana Territory and the highest-ranking officer in the United States Army, but secretly sworn to the Emperor of Spain for decades and paid as a spy under the codename "Agent 13." Burr's fluid vision was also funded by British ambassador Anthony Merry and Spanish minister Carlos Casa Irujo, as chatter spread that he could field 50,000 soldiers and establish an empire ringing the Gulf of Mexico. He initially humored the muddled embellishments to conceal the true targets of his planned conquests, but whispers of insurrection abounded in this ruckus.

In April 1805, Burr expanded the coalition as a thoroughly legitimate enterprise that attracted generals, senators, governors and even two future presidents: Andrew Jackson and William Henry Harrison. In May, on an island homestead in the Ohio River between Marietta,

Ohio and northwest Virginia he met Harman Blennerhassett, who was eager for adventure and agreed to sponsor the campaign. Arriving at the mouth of the Mississippi River in June, Burr enthralled the Mexican Society of New Orleans, an organization dedicated to liberating Mexico that pledged 30,000 combatants and 55 cannons to the filibuster. As he traveled home, he predicted a swift victory in the southwest should the United States and Spain come into conflict.

After his reconnaissance, Burr twice met with President Jefferson, who was so impressed that his 1805 address to Congress told Americans to prepare for filibusters against Spanish colonies. Jefferson also saw deep sectionalism in the residents of the Louisiana Purchase, wishing to "keep them in Union, if it be for them good, but separate them, if it be better," and even proposed two separate eastern and western confederacies divided by the Appalachian Mountains.[15] Burr then recruited William Eaton, who had conducted a successful filibuster of his own in northern Africa. The designs on Spanish lands enthused Eaton as achievable and profitable, so he likewise discussed them with the president. Burr also enlisted George Morgan, who led the failed Spanish colonization of what is now Missouri, opining that Jefferson was a weak commander and western states would splinter within five years.

Sensing an encroachment by the spring of 1806, Spanish defenses swelled along the disputed Sabine River west of New Orleans and the American army reinforced its eastern shore. When war appeared imminent that July, Burr launched the filibuster in a ciphered letter to Wilkinson with orders to rendezvous near Natchez that December. In September, Burr purchased the Bastrop Tract, 350,000 acres straddling Orleans and Louisiana territories, for a massive settlement and lucrative speculation. He designated Blennerhassett Island the northernmost rally point, ordered fifteen boats in Marietta and then departed for Nashville where he secured 3,000 militiamen.

As activity intensified, newspapers printed outrageous warnings that "'Burr fever' was infecting the West" and he would invite European allies to overrun the nation.[16] Fears crescendoed in Kentucky, where Burr was twice brought before a grand jury, but after the fieriest publisher admitted the articles were fabricated, he easily slipped the charges. Rather than an intentional diversion, if he had indeed plotted to overthrow the country, then one historian labelled it "the most widely advertised 'conspiracy' in history."[17]

Unbeknownst to the expedition, in early October, Wilkinson betrayed his associates and concealed his own impropriety by alarming Jefferson of a phantom army of 10,000 soldiers assailing the territory. After hastily drafting a truce with Spain and nullifying the legality of the filibuster, he imposed a horrifying reign of martial law throughout the region. He arrested each of his former partners, and if a journalist, attorney or judge questioned the antics, they too were imprisoned without legal process. Growing wickeder, the general placed a $5,000 bounty on Burr and sent private assassins for the reward. Dooming the campaign, Napoleon Bonaparte saber-rattled that any hostilities in the western hemisphere towards its ally Spain were affronts to France itself. This panicked Jefferson and after years of advancing the southwest filibuster and even boasting that Burr could subdue Mexico City in only six weeks, in late October he unexpectedly condemned those schemes.

When news of an unsanctioned military expedition reached Marietta, its residents swarmed to overwhelm the adventurers gathered on Blennerhassett Island. As militias massed along both banks, the unintimidating fleet of four boats crewed by 35 hands escaped downriver shortly after midnight on December 11th. Drifting past Cincinnati, which glistened with artillery to repel a horde now exaggerated to be 20,000 strong, near Clarksville, Indiana they were joined

by a handful of recruits in five boats. The flotilla met Burr at the mouth of the Cumberland River and was then boosted by 19 American soldiers at Memphis.

Here the expedition reached its largest size, with fewer than 100 people in nine boats, along with two horses and one cow. Its composition highlights its secondary objective to settle the Bastrop Tract if war with Spain did not materialize. Few of the men were soldiers; most were professionals including teachers, doctors, and singing and dancing instructors. Underscoring their non-combatant roles, many brought wives and children, as well as several enslaved men. Docked above Natchez, one resident quipped "a mighty force to erect a new and independent empire…if the president is to be believed…then Burr…is the greatest Don Quixote."[18]

Ashore in Mississippi Territory, Burr discovered that Jefferson and Wilkinson had delegitimized their filibuster and hurled allegations of sedition. For a third time he was spared a grand jury indictment, but quickly abandoned Mexico for Spanish West Florida. Federal authorities captured and dragged him 1,000 miles to Richmond, Virginia to be tried for treasonous offenses committed on Blennerhassett Island during the militia raid.

In a preview to the trial, through Ex parte Bollman, Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall reiterated the Constitutional description of treason as assembling for the purpose of levying war that involved an overt military action against the United States. Because of the narrow criteria, U.S. Attorney for Virginia George Hay threatened Marshall with impeachment, since there were now three fundamental flaws in the charges against Burr. No overt military action had taken place, he was hundreds of miles away on the night of the raid and circumstances outside of that date were inadmissible. Jefferson pouted that the case was founded on nothing

but “a mixture of rumors, conjectures and suspicions” and U.S. Attorney General Caesar Rodney conceded there was no evidence for the charge of treason.[19]

The “nation’s first great legal spectacle” began in March 1807 and over the next six months Aaron Burr defended not only his name, but his very life since treason was customarily punished by hanging.[20] He began with the radical tactic of subpoenaing Jefferson’s own correspondences to prove his innocence. His lead counsel John Wickham then chided the prosecution for not producing a single witness to the alleged “invisible army.” Under oath, Wilkinson confessed he mistranslated the cipher letter to hide his involvement and then spewed “a wonderous cargo…of words” so untrustworthy, the prosecution’s star witness came within two juror votes of becoming a codefendant.[21] The grand jury indicted Burr and seven others, charging that he “traitorously assembled and armed and arrayed, most wickedly, maliciously and traitorously did ordain, prepare and levy war against the said United States.”[22]

When the trial began in August, Burr added five co-counsels and Hay was flanked by three assistant prosecutors. This immaculate legal assemblage included two former, the current and one future U. S. Attorney Generals. Burr’s defense even counted two delegates who had written their definition of treason into the Constitution twenty years earlier. The state called over 140 witnesses, but only 14 testified. Eaton claimed that Burr planned to usurp the federal government, assassinate the president, drain the treasury and “turn ‘Congress neck and heels out of doors’,” and Morgan recalled that Burr bragged he could subdue Washington, D.C. with just 200 soldiers.[23] Amusingly, having been in his cups during those boasts, the defendant verified those statements as hyperbolic assessments of Jefferson’s military ineptitude.

The defense successfully demonstrated that the United States was ambiguously between peace and war with Spain during the filibuster, a position confirmed by all who took the stand.

When pressed, every witness swore to a voice they knew of no word, act or physical evidence from Aaron Burr that fit the criteria for treason. "(O)ne of the greatest criminal trials in American history" ended after a superficial 25 minutes of jury deliberation with a verdict of not guilty and a briefer 20 minutes to clear Burr of misdemeanor violations of the Neutrality Act.[24] Unbelievably, after being exonerated, he urged his codefendants to resume their campaign against Mexico, but the stunned companions declined.

It was later divulged that Jefferson spent over $100,000 (over $2.5 million today) underwriting expenses for anyone who aided the prosecution, including payments to Eaton, Morgan, and Wilkinson. Although the president also offered blanket pardons, no one ever accepted immunity in exchange for testimony against Burr. Two months after the acquittal, the president enshrined the prosecution's inadmissible evidence and unsworn statements in the Congressional record, along with censored transcripts from the four stenographers by removing any language he felt was too sympathetic to the defense. "(I)f he couldn't convict him in a court of law, Jefferson meant to convict him in the eyes of History."[25]

Burr's innocence did not alleviate his disgrace or civil suits, so he sought redemption overseas. In 1808, he arrived in England to reinvigorate an expedition against Spanish America and, in desperation, even considered renouncing his citizenship. The British rejected his petition and fearful of unsettling their allies, he was soon exiled from that country. When he learned of Napoleon's reversed yearning to conquer Spanish colonies, the expatriate eagerly gave his filibustering plans to the emperor's brother Jerome, lamenting "now why the devil didn't he tell me of this two years ago!"[26] Inexplicably, Burr languished in France without an answer, reduced to hawking vinegar extract, selling false teeth, and translating fiction. Years later it was revealed

that his Bonaparte liaison floundered because he refused to condone any act that might harm the United States.

In the spring of 1812, Burr hoped to resuscitate his legal practice in New York City, but greater heartbreaks awaited. His ten-year-old grandson died of malaria and when a devastated Theodosia sailed to join her father that winter, her ship disappeared off the Outer Banks. An exceptionally valuable piece of luggage was also lost. It contained a confidential cache of her father's notes, letters, and evidence, entrusted right before his trial, which he intended to reference for his own history. Without an autobiography, Burr intreated his son-in-law to defend him in the coming generation; however, Joseph Alston died three years later. Afterwards he cared little who told his story, passively allowing it to be appropriated by his detractors.

Instead, Burr channeled his grief into serving widows, orphans, homemakers and divorcees, a reputation heralded as "the first American lawyer to specialize in family law."[27] Later he adopted two children, who were likely his biological sons, and supported many other abandoned youths who were not his progeny. Over the decades, as other soldier-adventurers were glorified for achieving his southwest visions, the retired filibusterer regretted "I was right! I was only thirty years too soon! What was treason in me, is patriotism now."[28]

At the age of 77 he married the wealthy widow Eliza Jumel, only to acrimoniously separate a few months later. On September 14, 1836, the day their divorce was finalized, Aaron Burr passed in a Staten Island boarding house where he had withdrawn in his final weeks. His will held a surprise of two previously unacknowledged children, young daughters sired in his mid-70s. After his death, stories also emerged of two multiracial individuals who were his children with his first wife's servant Mary Emmons, but they and their descendants were not fully recognized until 2018.

Unlike his legacy-preoccupied peers, for most of his life Burr was apathetic about his own remembrances, demurring that "historians are partisans, on one side or the other…no confidence can be placed in their statements."[29] He left a paucity of material, never authored legendary articles or remarkable essays, even his correspondences and opinions were rarely recorded, once cautioning his law clerk "(t)hings written remain."[30] By comparison, Hamilton's papers fill 27 volumes and Jefferson's more than double that size, yet Burr's own were published incredibly late in 1984, in just two volumes.

Deprived of his own account, most early tales of the founding fathers invited a ritual slaughter of Burr's memory because for generations the country's origin story needed evildoers to fully celebrate its champions. "As the most romanticized and vilified figure in American literature," this "Dark Star of the Founding" was the subject of over 100 plays, musicals, novels and short stories, but never a modern biography.[31]

Around the turn of the millennium, numerous popular histories were written about the founders including Ron Chernow's landmark *Alexander Hamilton,* which was sourced for Lin-Manuel Miranda's massively successful *Hamilton: An American Musical.* Leslie Odom, Jr.'s Tony Award winning portrayal of Aaron Burr introduced this American iconoclast to 21st century audiences. While most academics had been "scared to touch a person so much under the spell of sensationalist fiction and melodramatic romance," the rediscovered obsession with Burr sparked his first biography written by a professionally trained historian.[32] Nancy Isenberg's *Aaron Burr: Fallen Founder* provoked scholarly revisitation and latent appreciation for this complex character.

Approaching the revolutionary generation with such honesty illuminates realistic versions of its founding idols, but also gilds their foils. Summed by Isenberg, "(w)hat separates history

from myth is that history takes the whole picture, whereas myth averts our eyes from the truth when it turns men into heroes and gods."[33] In that spirit, how we remember Aaron Burr reflects how we value the past and appreciate our roles in this shared national narrative, as well as illustrates our wishes for empathy and authenticity when we commit our own stories to the ages.

---

[1] John Adams quoted in James E. Lewis, Jr., *The Burr Conspiracy: Uncovering the Story of an Early American Crisis*, 2018, page 175
[2] William Bradford, Jr. quoted in Nancy Isenberg, *Fallen Founder: The Life of Aaron Burr*, 2007, page 20
[3] Carey Wallace, "Forget Hamilton, Burr Is the Real Hero," *Time*, April 14, 2016
[4] Roger Kennedy, *Burr, Hamilton, and Jefferson: A Study in Character*, 2000, page 366
[5] Isenberg, page 105
[6] Kennedy, page 21
[7] George Washington quoted in Isenberg, page 170
[8] Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton*, 2004, page 587
[9] Jonathan Schifman, "How New York City Found Clean Water," *Smithsonian*, November 25, 2019
[10] Arthur Herman, "The Hazards of Being Notorious," *Wall Street Journal*, May 24, 2007; Aaron Burr quoted in Gordon S. Wood, *Revolutionary Characters: What Made the Founders Different*, 2006 page 234
[11] Aaron Burr quoted in Isenberg, page 209
[12] James Baynard quoted in David O. Stewart, *American Emperor: Aaron Burr's Challenge to Jefferson's America*, 2011, page 24
[13] Buckner F. Melton, Jr., *Aaron Burr: Conspiracy to Treason*, 2001, page 23
[14] Theodore Roosevelt quoted in Stewart, page 299
[15] Thomas Jefferson quoted in Melton, Jr., page 44
[16] Stewart, page 165
[17] Kennedy, page 302
[18] Thomas Rodney quoted in Kennedy, page 301
[19] Thomas Jefferson quoted in Stewart, page 211
[20] Lewis, Jr., page 110
[21] Washington Irving quoted in Lewis, Jr., page 117
[22] Stewart, page 224
[23] William Eaton quoted in Stewart, page 125
[24] Isenberg, page 323
[25] Stewart, page 259
[26] Aaron Burr quoted in Stewart, page 285
[27] Isenberg, page 389
[28] Aaron Burr quoted in Stewart, page 306
[29] Aaron Burr quoted in Wood, page 227
[30] Aaron Burr quoted in Chernow, page 192
[31] Aaron Burr quoted in Wood, page 227; Stewart, page 3
[32] Aaron Burr quoted in Wood, page 227
[33] Isenberg, page 414

**Bibliography**


Books

Brands, H. W. *Founding Partisans: Hamilton, Madison, Jefferson, Adams and the Brawling Birth of American Politics*, 2023

Chernow, Ron. *Alexander Hamilton*, 2004

Davis, Matthew L. *Memoirs of Aaron Burr*, 1836

Ellis, Joseph. *Founding Brothers*, 2000

Flemming, Thomas. *Duel: Alexander Hamilton, Aaron Burr, and the Future of America*, 1999

Head, David and Timothy Hemmis. *A Republic of Scoundrels: the Schemers, Intriguers, and Adventurers Who Created a New American Nation*, 2023

Isenberg, Nancy. *Fallen Founder: The Life of Aaron Burr*, 2007

Kennedy, Roger. *Burr, Hamilton, and Jefferson: A Study in Character*, 2000

Knapp, Samuel Lorenzo. *The life of Aaron Burr*, 1835

Lewis, Jr., James E. *The Burr Conspiracy: Uncovering the Story of an Early American Crisis*, 2018

Melton, Jr., Buckner F. *Aaron Burr: Conspiracy to Treason*, 2001

Parton, James. *The life and times of Aaron Burr, lieutenant-colonel in the army of the revolution, United States senator, vice-president of the United States, etc*., 1858

Stewart, David O. *American Emperor: Aaron Burr's Challenge to Jefferson's America*, 2011

Vidal, Gore. *Burr: A Novel*, 1973

Wandell, Samuel Henry and Meade Minnigerode. *Aaron Burr; a Biography Written, in Large Part, from Original and Hitherto Unused Material, Volume 2*, 1925

Wood, Gordon S. *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 1993

Wood, Gordon S. *The American Revolution: A History*, 2002

Wood, Gordon S. *Revolutionary Characters: What Made the Founders Different*, 2006

Articles

Andrews, Evan. “Aaron Burr’s Notorious Treason Case,” *History,* May 31, 2017

Banner, Jr., James M. “Stranger in His Own Land: The Mystery of Aaron Burr,” *The Weekly Standard,* June 4, 2007

Banner, Jr., James M., “Aaron Burr, Conspirator,” *The Weekly Standard,* April 16, 2018

Cohalan, Jr., John P. “Let Aaron Burr Rest in Peace,” *The New York Times,* July 19, 1982

David, Kenneth C. “The History of American Impeachment,” *Smithsonian,* June 12, 2017

Dos Passos, John. “The Conspiracy and Trial of Aaron Burr,” *American Heritage,* Volume 17, Issue 2, February 1966

Ferling, John. “Thomas Jefferson, Aaron Burr and the Election of 1800,” *Smithsonian,* November 1, 2004

Feuerherd, Peter. “The First Ugly Election: America, 1800,” *JSTOR Daily,* July 4, 2016

Good, Cassandra. “That Time When Alexander Hamilton Almost Dueled James Monroe,” *Smithsonian,* October 26, 2015

Gopnik, Adam. “’Hamilton’ and the Hip-Hop Case for Progressive Heroism,” *The New Yorker,* February 5, 2016

Grinspan, Jon. “Did Aaron Burr Really Try to Take Over Half of America?” *American Heritage,* May 22, 2007

Hanc, John. “Before There Was ‘Hamilton,’ There was ‘Burr’,” *Smithsonian,* June 6, 2016

Herman, Arthur. “The Hazards of Being Notorious,” *Wall Street Journal,* May 24, 2007

Holpuch, Amanda. “Aaron Burr, Vice President Who Killed Hamilton, Had Children of Color,” *The Guardian,* August 24, 2019

Isenberg, Nancy. “Liberals Love Alexander Hamilton. But Aaron Burr was a Real Progressive Hero,” *The Washington Post,* March 30, 2016

Kindy, David. “New Research Suggests Alexander Hamilton Was a Slave Owner,” *Smithsonian,* November 10, 2020

LePore, Jill. “Sex and violence ruined Aaron Burr’s name-unfairly, according to this life of Jefferson’s No. 2,” *New York Times*, May 27, 2007

Lewis, Jr., James R. “The Burr Conspiracy: Uncovering the Story of An Early American Crisis,” *American Heritage*, Volume 63, Issue 2, 2018

Maranzani, Barbara. “Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr’s Deadly Rivalry,” *History*, June 25, 2020

Maranzani, Barbara. “America’s First Multi-Millionaire,” *History*, July 17, 2013

Maranzani, Barbara. “What Happened to Aaron Burr After He Killed Alexander Hamilton in a Duel?” *History*, July 10, 2018

McCabe, Scott. “Crime History: Former Vice President Tried for Treason, *Washington Examiner*, August 2, 2011

McDowell, Edwin. “New View on Burr Treason Case Letter, *The New York Times*, July 11, 1982

Morse, Minna Scherlinder. “Facing a Bumpy History: The Much-Maligned Theory of Phrenology Gets a Tip of the Hat from Modern Neuroscience,” *Smithsonian*, October 1997

Nodjimbadem, Katie. “When Did the Vice Presidency Stop Going to the 2nd Place Winner,” *Smithsonian*, December 2015

Power, Cornelia. “Women in Colonial American Were More Powerful Than We Give Them Credit For,” *Time*, March 16, 2022

Pruitt, Sarah. “8 Most Contested US Presidential Elections,” *History*, April 26, 2016

Pruitt, Sarah. “The History of the Electoral College Debate,” *History*, December 13, 2016

Pruitt, Sarah. “The Scandal That Ruined Alexander Hamilton’s Chances of Becoming President,” *History*, April 20, 2018

Pruitt, Sarah. “What Was Alexander Hamilton’s Role in Aaron Burr’s Contentious Presidential Defeat?” *History*, June 25, 2020

Romeo, Jess. “The Erotic Appeal of Alexander Hamilton,” *JSTOR Daily*, July 31, 2020

Roos, Dave. “Thomas Jefferson Signed the Insurrection Act in 1807 to Foil a Plot by Aaron Burr,” *History*, June 3, 2020

Roos, Dave. "What Happens If There's a Tie in a Us Presidential Election?" *History,* October 5, 2020

Rowe, Adam. "'Founding Partisans' and 'A Republic of Scoundrels': Opportunists and Patriots," *Wall Street Journal,* December 1, 2023

Sarat, Austin. "What the Nation's Founders Said About the Indictment of a Former President," *Smithsonian,* April 6, 2023

Schifman, Jonathan. "How New York City Found Clean Water," *Smithsonian,* November 25, 2019

Sheppard., R.Z. "Foundling Father," *Time,* November 5, 1973

Smith, Ryan P. "Hamiton and Burr's Dueling Pistols Are Coming to Washington, D.C.," *Smithsonian,* May 9, 2018

Spivey, William. "Aaron Burr's Secret Wife," *Medium,* July 31, 2022

Stewart, David O. "Burr, Ogden and Dayton: The Original Jersey Boys," *Smithsonian,* August 11, 2011

Stewart, David O. "Treason! The 1807 Trial of Aaron Burr challenged the Constitution," *American Heritage,* Volume 62, Issue 1, Spring 2012,

Tenprio, Rich. "A Republic of Scoundrels: America's Original White Men Behaving Badly," *The Guardian,* December 10, 2023

Wallace, Carey. "Forget Hamilton, Burr Is the Real Hero," *Time,* April 14, 2016

Webb, James R. "Burr Returns to the Scene," *American Heritage,* Volume 26, Issue 5, August 1975

Webb, James R. "The Fateful Encounter," *American Heritage,* Volume 26, Issue 5, August 1975

Weisberger, Bernard A. "The Abominable No. 2 Man," *American Heritage,* Volume 42, Issue 5, September 1991

White, Jonathan W. "Thomas Jefferson, Aaron Burr and the American Way of Treason," *Smithsonian,* March 17, 2017

Wills, Matthew. "Aaron Burr: The Most Hated Man in American History," *JSTOR Daily,* January 14, 2016

Wood, Gordon S. "The Real Treason of Aaron Burr," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society,* Volume 143, Number 2, June 1999

Yglsias, Matthew. "How Lin-Manuel Miranda Taught Liberals to Love Alexander Hamilton," *Vox*, April 20, 2016

Zoglin, Richard. "What Would Have Happened If Alexander Hamilton Lived," *Time*, December 30, 2015

"A Black Aaron Burr," *Time*, June 11, 1923

"Aaron Burr Acquitted of Treason," *History*, August 31, 2020

"Aaron Burr Arrested for Alleged Treason," *History*, February 18, 2020

"Aaron Burr Slays Alexander Hamilton in Duel," *History*, June 30, 2022

"Aaron Burr," *Historical Society of the New York Courts*, January 1, 2024

"Aaron Burr," *History*, May 6, 2021

"Aaron Burr: Forgotten Feminist," *National Portrait Gallery*, January 1, 2024

"Eighty Years of Ambition," *Time*, December 28, 1925

"Filibuster," *History*, September 12, 2017

Quest Club Papers

Beatty, Bob. "Alexander Hamilton: A Modern Marvel," April 26, 2019

Haines, Bruce. "Pistols at Dawn: A History of Dueling," December 5, 2014

Rolland, Ian M. "Judging Thomas Jefferson," March 17, 2000

Meyer, Louis H. "Thomas Jefferson: Our Third President," April 25, 1969

Other

aaronburrassociation.org

Miranda, Lin-Manuel, "Hamilton: An American Musical," 2015

Miranda, Lin-Manuel. *Hamilton*, directed by Thomas Kail, Disney Pictures, 2020, *Disney+*