

Dueling brothers: the duel of alexander hamilton and aaron burr



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On July 11th, 1804 Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton were rowed across the Hudson River in separate boats; they were going to duel. Burr was accompanied by his loyal protégé, William Van Ness; Hamilton brought with him Dr. David Hosack and his devotee, Nathaniel Pendleton. They met at a narrow ledge located 20 feet above the water and measuring ten feet wide and forty feet long, a popular location for duels, as they were illegal at the time and this site provided isolation. Because of the legal issues, Pendleton, Hosack, and Van Ness were required to turn their backs to the proceedings so that, if ever brought to court, all could truthfully claim that they had seen nothing. This was called “ language of deniability” and was a part of the code duello, which was the established etiquette duelers were expected to abide by.

These were two men, founders of the country, who were supposedly members of a group of people who “ knew and trusted each other.” So what brought them to Weehawken? Ellis in *Founding Brothers* does not give the reader this answer straight away. Rather than starting at the beginning, he begins at the end: the day of the duel.

Ellis first describes Burr, making him out to be full of style and commanding in presence, mentioning his title of Colonel. He says that Burr was quite nonchalant about the whole thing, carrying himself towards the Hudson river with the “ air of a natural aristocrat strolling to an appointment with destiny.” He also states that although no one could really know what was going through Burr’s mind as he was rowed to Weehawken, it is the general belief among historians today that Burr was thinking that he had finally caught Hamilton and that he was more than ready to strike and kill.

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Ellis remains in the same timeframe, but now examines Hamilton. He says that Hamilton, like Burr, held himself with a gentlemanly air and tells of how, facing a general, Burr was outranked. There is no mention of flair, but rather of Hamilton's delicate bone structure. Though slight and subtle, the differing tones in the two descriptions make Hamilton out to be a sort of paternal figure and Burr to be an impulsive child. The narration furthers this premise by describing Burr as "dark" and like an "eagle" or a "raven" and Hamilton as "peaches and cream." Ellis says it was as though Burr's New England Puritanism was coiled inside, waiting to explode, and that Hamilton conveyed kinetic energy that came out in bursts of brilliance.

As Ellis continues, he focuses heavily on Hamilton, perhaps because Hamilton had left the world with insight into his thoughts on the duel. Enclosed with his will, Hamilton left a personal statement saying he felt now ill-will towards Burr and wished reserve and throw away his first fire. Because Hamilton had been the one to be challenged, he was allowed to choose the weapons. He chose a pair of pistols that had concealed hair-triggers that required only one pound of pressure to fire a round. The hair-trigger was not set for the duel, which meant that, in order to fire, twenty pounds of pressure was required. This, along with other factors, made the gun's aim highly unreliable and made it unlikely that either party would be injured in the exchange. If both parties fired and missed, a conference would be held to decide whether they should go another round or if the obligations of honor had been met.

Ellis gives the reader the rules and instructions that were given to Burr and Hamilton, and tells of a peculiarity in the story that goes against what <https://assignbuster.com/dueling-brothers-the-duel-of-alexander-hamilton-and-aaron-burr/>

Hamilton had said about not wanting to shoot Burr. It is said that upon reaching his designated location, Hamilton requested a moment to put on his eyeglasses and tested the sights of the gun towards several imaginary targets, something that would not be required if he had no intention of shooting Burr. Ellis then skips over the moments following Hamilton's actions, and gives himself a chance to muse that those moments, which are described by different people quite contradictorily, prove that there is no such thing as objective truth — only a bunch of negotiable perceptions.

When the duel began, two shots were fired and Hamilton was hit. Burr seemed surprised by the shot and wanted to go speak to Hamilton, but Van Ness would not allow it and hurried Burr away to their boat. While on his own boat, Hamilton did not seem aware that his own gun had been fired, warning the men to be careful because it was cocked and undischarged. Hamilton died the next day at 2 o'clock.

The popular consensus was that Burr had killed Hamilton in cold blood. Anti-Burr newspapers created false stories (such as that Burr wore a suit that could deflect bullets), fabrications (that as Hamilton's wife wept, Burr held a toast to his death), and the like. Burr fled, ashamed and disgraced, not stopping until he reached Georgia. Hamilton was the American martyr, and Burr the traitor.

Perhaps Burr would have been spared this shame if there were a few pieces of information added to the historical record. Unfortunately, the crucial five second interval when the shots were fired is missing, making it impossible to know precisely what happened. People could only guess based on the duel of

words between the only two witnesses, Van Ness and Pendleton, and the pro-Hamilton, pro-Burr advocates of the day.

Before the details of the duel became a frenzied fight between parties, Van Ness and Pendleton published a joint statement that said that both men had conducted themselves in accordance with the code duello, which meant the men had essentially acted as gentlemen. This was important at the time, since acting a gentlemen was often more important than abiding the law. Van Ness and Pendleton agreed that both men had fired their weapons, and that there was an interval of a few seconds between shots.

And that is about all that is agreed upon between the Hamiltonian account and the Burr version. The Hamiltonian version goes like this: Hamilton came to the duel, certain he would not kill Burr. With that logic, it wouldn't make sense for Hamilton to fire first. Rather, Burr fired while Hamilton's pistol was still in the air and the impact of Burr's shot caused Hamilton to jerk his trigger finger in surprise and send a shot into the trees above Burr. This would explain Hamilton's remarks about his loaded gun while in the boat. Also, Van Ness claimed to have gone back to the ledge the following day and to have seen a severed branch above where Burr had stood. What this rendition would not explain is why there was a gap in between shots. If Hamilton merely fired out of surprise, the reaction would have been immediate. The Burr account: Van Ness said that Hamilton fired first, but missed, and Burr waited a few seconds for the smoke to clear from around Hamilton and for Pendleton to begin the count. Pendleton was caught up the drama, and was rendered speechless. Not wanting to risk losing his shot, Burr fired and Hamilton fell instantly. According to Van Ness, Burr informed <https://assignbuster.com/dueling-brothers-the-duel-of-alexander-hamilton-and-aaron-burr/>

him that after Hamilton fired his foot was caught upon a stone or piece of wood, causing him to sprain his ankle. Ellis says that this was excuse on Burr's part, who really fired out of surprise after Hamilton's shot and did not wish to seem to be flinching.

Neither story fits perfectly, largely because the stories were constructed around self-interested motives. The Hamiltonians needed to claim that their chief was a martyr who would fully expose himself to Burr's fire. They needed to change the sequence of events so that Burr fired first in order to preserve Hamilton's reputation. The Burr side needed to claim that Burr had acted honorably and in accordance to the code duello. They needed to distort Hamilton's honorable intentions to justify Burr's response.

Now that Ellis has presented the reader with the stories both sides had come up with and the reasoning behind distorting them as they did, he gives an explanation of what he believes really happened. He says that Hamilton did fire first, but honored his pledge to not shoot Burr by sending his round into the trees above Burr. Burr, who couldn't possibly have known of Hamilton's pledge, only knew that a shot had come at him and that the code duello said he had every right to fire a fatal shot at Hamilton. But, Ellis questions, did he? He would not gain a thing by killing Hamilton, except for shame. The events following Burr's shot sufficiently confirm that he had not meant to kill Hamilton; his reaction to Hamilton's collapse was one of shock and surprise, for one, and an urge to speak to Hamilton. When the men spoke of having just one physician, he said that even one was unnecessary. Also, when duelists wanted to leave their opponent with a mere flesh wound, the most

common targets were the hips and legs; Burr's shot missed being a simple flesh wound by only two or three inches.

Even in this convincing argument of what really occurred at Weehawken, Ellis admits that one can never really know what happened based on the evidence there is. He says it's very possible that Burr was so hateful towards Hamilton that he purposely fired a fatal shot. It is possible that Hamilton fired first and missed intentionally, and the only plausible explanation for his words on the boat is that in his semi-consciousness he was not really aware of what he was saying. Or, a less likely explanation is that Pendleton and Hosack made up the remark to support their story. It is also possible that Burr's own shot was accidental, given the unpredictability of guns aim at the time.

It makes sense to focus so heavily on what happened in the exchanges involving all these men, as most history books contain the Hamiltonian version — and that version is most likely inaccurate. The real question is: why were the men at Weehawken in the first place?

The duel was a result of personal animosity and political disagreement, a “duel of words” that took place before the fateful duel at Weehawken was begun by Burr. In June of 1804, Burr was running for governor of New York. Two months earlier, a letter in the Albany Register mentioned Hamilton questioning Burr's qualifications for such a position. It was on June 18th that Burr brought this to Hamilton's attention. Burr expected for Hamilton to deny having ever said the words, but Hamilton responded vaguely, saying he could not help what others might infer from his words. This irritated Burr

hugely, and prompted him to insult Hamilton in one of the worst ways, saying Hamilton “lacked the Spirit to Maintain or the Magnanimity to retract” his own words. Burr said this was not the first time Hamilton had insulted him and that he had never returned with insults. Burr also said that he once confronted Hamilton on the topic of the insults and that Hamilton apologized with the promise of stopping, only to continue to slander Burr’s name.

On June 25th, a message was relayed to Hamilton stating that Burr wanted Hamilton to disavow any words he may have said to damage Burr’s honor. Hamilton then issued a statement saying that any comments he had made were based solely on political issues and had nothing to do with what he thought of Burr personally. According to the code duello this statement that the disagreement was about politics should have caused Burr to accept Hamilton’s apology because affairs of honor were supposed to only involve personal issues. Burr was angry that Hamilton had not made it clear earlier what he considered political issues and what he considered to be personal ones. Van Ness said that, at this point, “no denial or declaration will be satisfactory” unless it were a blanket apology, covering Burr’s entire career. Hamilton could not do so without lying, because he had been slandering Burr for much of his career. It was then that Van Ness delivered the invitation for the duel.

Burr and Hamilton contradicted Ellis’s thesis that the country had been built by men who knew and trusted each other because they were, in the end, bitter antagonists. These men had come into heated conflict, hoping to prove to the country that they were men of honor and character, something the <https://assignbuster.com/dueling-brothers-the-duel-of-alexander-hamilton-and-aaron-burr/>

country still very much needed. Just as the world may never know what really went on in Weehawken, we may never resolve whether Burr and Hamilton really adhered to the principles of respectful disagreement that were so central to America's founding.