

Why, Aaron Burr, did you fire ?

..by Rev. Richard W. Davies

July 11, 1804; the fatal duel between Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr took place at sunrise beside the Hudson River in Weehawken, New Jersey. An enduring question is why Vice President of the United States, Aaron Burr, chose to pull the trigger on his pistol, while Alexander Hamilton, a New York lawyer, planned to fire his pistol into the air.

Hamilton was born in the British West Indies on January 11, 1757. He had a very difficult childhood in a dysfunctional family. When 15, he met the Rev. Hugh Knox, a Presbyterian minister who opened to him to the Great Awakening spiritual movement, and arranged for him to study at the College of New Jersey (now named Princeton). In the Revolutionary War he caught the eye of George Washington and an enduring bond between these two men began. President Washington named Hamilton to be Secretary of the Treasury. He was a financial genius, and he led Washington to call for banking and industrial progress. Men like Thomas Jefferson did not favor Hamilton's views, choosing to retain the colonial emphasis on agriculture, and tobacco farming in particular. Hamilton and Jefferson were as alienated from each other as Hamilton and Washington were united. In 1794, Hamilton came to Pittsburgh as part of the militia to quell the Whiskey Rebellion.

Aaron Burr was born on February 6, 1756 in Newark, New Jersey. He graduated from the College of New Jersey (Princeton) in 1772. He studied theology but shifted to law. He served in the Revolutionary War following which he practiced law in New York. He entered political life in 1784 and was elected a Senator in 1791. In the Presidential election of 1800, he and Jefferson were tied. The House of Representatives took 36 ballots to elect Jefferson as President and Burr as Vice President.

Not surprisingly, strong willed and determined political leaders struggled to express their respective vision for a new nation. Hamilton and Burr were frequently engaged in a vigorous exchange of patriotic convictions.

When Burr learned that President Thomas Jefferson would drop him from the ticket for re-election in 1804, Burr tried to save his own personal reputation and career by eyeing the governorship of New York. There was no Federalist party candidate to challenge the Republican party. The question for the Federalists like Hamilton was which Republican candidate would be the least offensive. Hamilton feared that Burr would hurt the new union of states because he resented the power of the southern states. In a private dinner with friends, Hamilton made some very critical political comments about Burr. A dinner guest wrote a summary of what was said, and the comments were made public. In the April 1804 election, Burr lost decisively. He chose to satisfy his festering anger by challenging Hamilton to a duel.

Hamilton confided in his friend, the Rev. John Mason, that he detested the duel as a method of conflict resolution, and that he sensed that Burr was determined to kill him. Hamilton's son Philip was killed in a duel in 1802.

On the Sunday before the duel, Hamilton read the service of Morning Prayer from the Episcopal Church. He did his normal legal duties as a successful New York lawyer through Tuesday. Very early Wednesday morning Hamilton and Burr met in a secluded spot in New Jersey, because dueling was heavily punished in New York Burr was a marksman, and he brought his own pistol, while Hamilton borrowed a pistol since he had not owned one for years. At the word "present" the two pistols were fired. Hamilton's shot hit a tree. In French, *delope*, this was throwing away your shot. Burr's shot inflicted a mortal wound. Hamilton was quickly taken by his seconds to a residence in Manhattan.

Hamilton wanted the ministrations of the Rev. Benjamin Moore, rector of Trinity Church, New York and Bishop of the Diocese of New York. Moore denied any ministration, for fear it would give credibility to dueling. Hamilton then asked for the Rev. John Mason, a Scotch Presbyterian, who also denied giving him Holy Communion because it was not in a church setting. Hamilton again asked for Benjamin Moore, who heard Hamilton's confession of faith, his forgiveness of Burr, and his desire to unite with the Episcopal Church, which he had not yet done. He was then given the final sacraments.

Hamilton asked that his wife Elizabeth be called, but not told the extent of his wound. When she came with their children, she went into an understandable frantic state.

On Thursday, July 12, at 2 p.m., Hamilton died at age 49. At the foot of his bed was Ella, and their seven children. Later on, Ella opened the letter Hamilton had written in expectation that he would be killed. He asked her to be consoled by religion, comforted

that they would meet again in a better world. He called her the best of wives and the best of women. Hamilton was buried in the Burial Ground of Trinity Church, New York. Saturday, July 14, 1804.

References:

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