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archives



“WHY, SOLD

The Alexander Hamilton–Aaron Burr duel of 1804 was one of the most tragic face-offs in the nation’s

BY THOMAS FLEMING

On July 11, 1804, Colonel Aaron Burr, Vice President of the United States, and General Alexander Hamilton, former Secretary of the Treasury under President George Washington, journeyed to the west bank of the Hudson River in the vicinity of the village of Weehawken, New Jersey to fight a duel. Colonel Burr’s first shot struck General Hamilton just above the hip, tore through his liver, and lodged in his backbone. Hamilton died in agony some thirty hours later.

Why did these two men, among the four or five best-known politicians in America at the time, choose to settle their differences in this deadly way? The question has exercised historians, novelists, and playwrights for the past two hundred years.

A substantial number of novelists and playwrights have portrayed Burr as a sinister murderer who cold-bloodedly forced a reluctant Hamilton to fight. Others have seen Hamilton as a crafty



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Aaron Burr

TIERS, WHY?”

history. Two hundred years later, new research answers the historical question: why did it happen at all?

dissembler who hoped to kill Burr by using a secret hair trigger on his pistol. Some psycho-historians have argued that the duel was a thinly disguised suicide for Hamilton, while others have explained the clash as an example of the popularity of the political duel in the first decade of American national politics. The most common explanation, stated in dozens of textbooks and histories, maintains that Hamilton vigorously opposed and criticized Burr when he ran for governor of New York in 1804. When Burr lost, he supposedly sought revenge by challenging Hamilton.

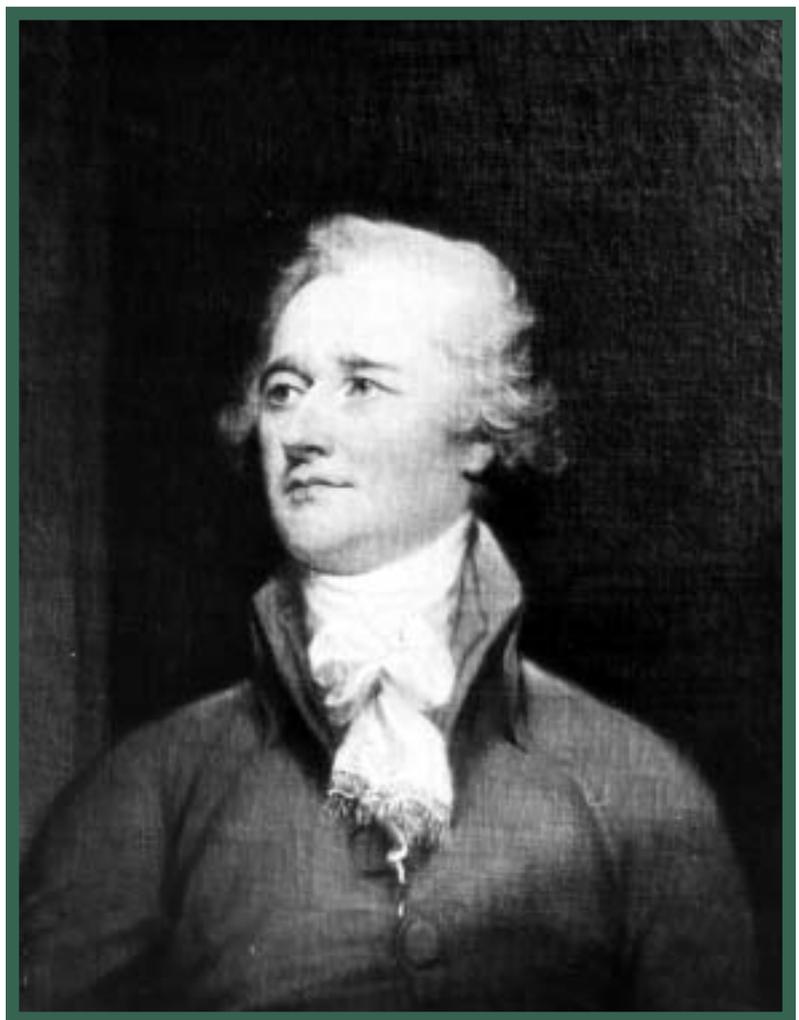
Refuting History

The claim that Hamilton plotted to kill Burr by using a secret hair trigger on his pistol is best refuted by the actual exchange between Hamilton and his second, Colonel Nathaniel Pendleton, as the latter handed Hamilton his pistol. “Do you want the hair spring set?” Pendleton asked.

“Not this time,” Hamilton said.

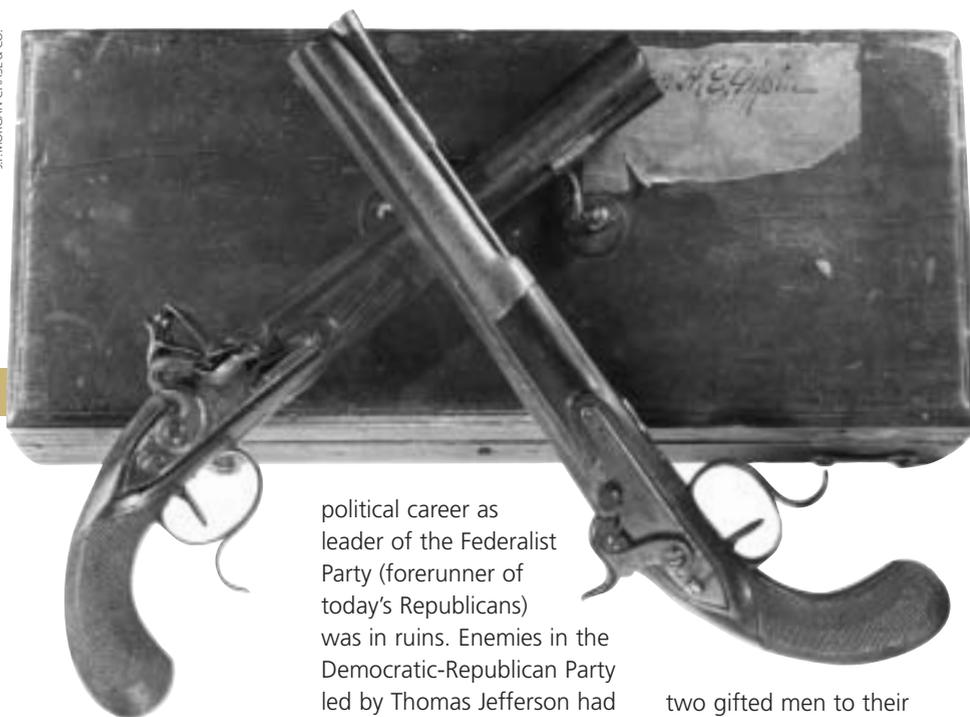
There was nothing secret about hair triggers. They were regularly advertised in New York newspapers as an attractive feature of some pistols. Few knowledgeable duelists used them, however, because there was a possibly fatal tradeoff in getting the first quick shot: no time to aim the gun.

Backers of the covert suicide theory point to the indubitable fact that Hamilton’s



Alexander Hamilton

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The pistols used by Hamilton and Burr in their duel were purchased by The Bank of The Manhattan Company (now J.P. Morgan Chase & Co.) in 1930. The latter retains custody of the weapons.

political career as leader of the Federalist Party (forerunner of today's Republicans) was in ruins. Enemies in the Democratic-Republican Party led by Thomas Jefferson had forced him to publicly confess to an affair with a Philadelphia woman, Maria Reynolds. In 1802, Hamilton's oldest son, Philip, deepened his father's melancholy by dying in a political duel with one of the

The political duel was the background, not the foreground, of the clash between General Hamilton and Colonel Burr.

general's Jeffersonian foes—a tragedy that destroyed the sanity of Hamilton's oldest daughter, Angelica. But Hamilton had five other children who badly needed his fathering and care. Though he was discouraged by President Jefferson's popularity, he had by no means abandoned his hope of achieving power.

As for arguing that the spread of the political duel was a sort of psychological "disease" that lured these

two gifted men to their appointment in Weehawken, this is true only as far as it goes—which is not very far. The political duel was the background, not the foreground, of the clash between General Hamilton and Colonel Burr.

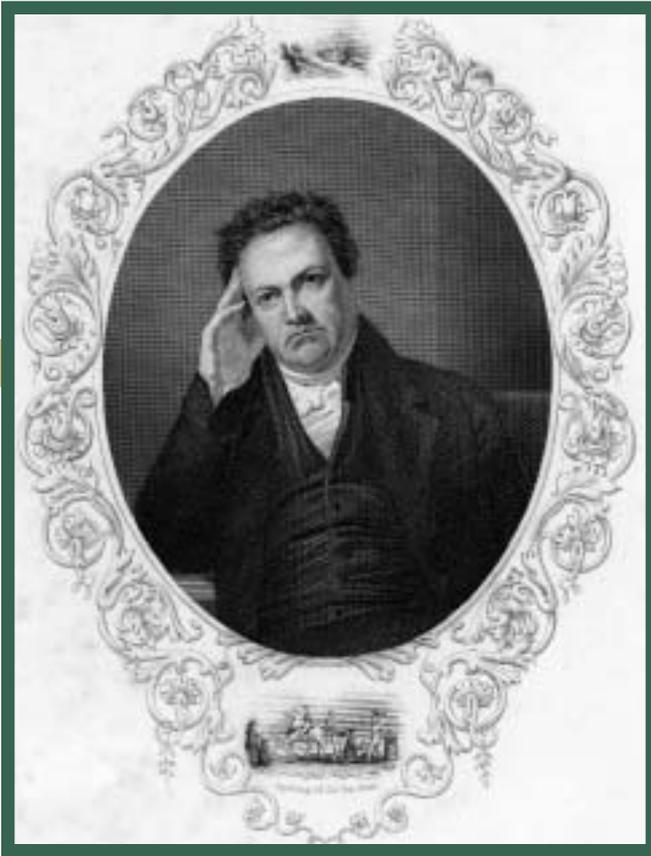
The most common explanation—Hamilton's supposedly vigorous opposition to Burr in the race for New York's governorship—has a rather large hole in it. After giving one relatively bland speech, in which he urged the members of the New York Federalist Party not to support Burr, Hamilton never said another public word on the subject. The reason was simple: almost every Federalist in New York State dismissed Hamilton's advice as envy, and backed Burr with money and votes. Hamilton had virtually nothing to do with Burr's defeat.

Ordeal by Slander

The man who destroyed the vice president's run for governor of the Empire State was President Thomas Jefferson. He and Burr had had a calamitous

falling out after they won power in 1800. In the balloting at the Democratic-Republican congressional caucus that nominated Jefferson for another term early in 1804, Burr did not receive a single vote for vice president. Instead, Jefferson chose New York's aging governor, George Clinton, as his running mate—thus giving his tacit approval for one of the most vicious assaults on a major politician in the nation's history.

The director of this smear campaign was Governor Clinton's nephew, DeWitt Clinton, the mayor of New York City, and his conduit was *The American Citizen*, New York's Democratic-Republican newspaper. In print, Burr was called a sadist who had lashed militiamen for the fun of it during the American Revolution, and a "cowardly bastard" for failing to challenge Hamilton after the *Citizen* published a critical letter Hamilton had written about him in 1801. Burr was also accused of embezzling his clients' estates (he was a lawyer), denounced as an atheist, and pilloried as a man who seduced innocent virgins and ruined the reputations of married women. Worst of all, according to the *Citizen*,



New York City Mayor DeWitt Clinton directed a smear campaign against Aaron Burr.

he consorted with Negroes to get their vote.

Few researchers who have portrayed Burr as evil have read this ordeal by slander, or are aware that the vice president refused to respond in kind.

The terrific abuse, climaxed by a crushing defeat at the polls, left Burr a bitter, deeply depressed man. After a month of lonely brooding, he came across a letter in a newspaper that described some caustic remarks Hamilton had made about him at an Albany dinner party a few days after Hamilton's speech to the Federalists. This letter became the ostensible reason for Burr's challenge to Hamilton.

Old Soldiers

Beneath the surface was a far more potent reason. Colonel Burr knew that there was

another route to power—military glory—and that General Hamilton was his chief competitor.

Few historians have noted how obsessively Hamilton clung to the title he won when George Washington appointed him commander of the American army in 1798 during the "quasi-war" with Revolutionary France. He was listed in the New York City directory as "General Hamilton." Burr was equally fond of his Revolutionary War title of colonel. One of his close friends said he had a lifelong "ardent love of military glory."

Reinforcing Burr's perception was the presence of Napoleon Bonaparte on the world scene, a soldier whose military prowess had restored order to France, another nation that

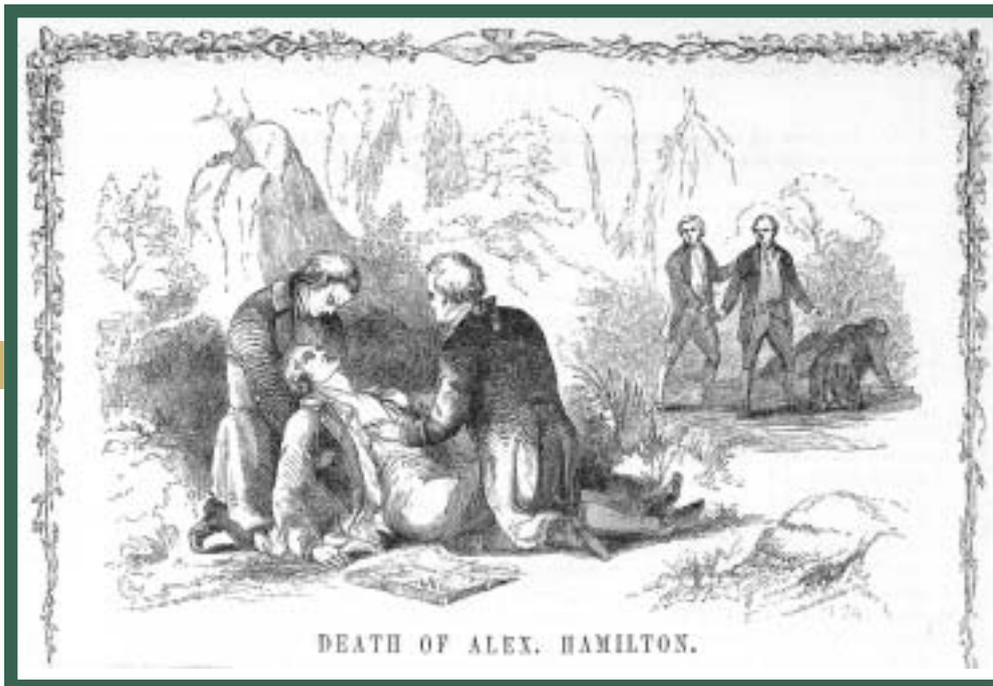
had undergone a decade of revolutionary chaos. Napoleon's career was followed in obsessive detail by American newspapers. Both Hamilton and Burr publicly expressed their admiration for this "man of destiny," as his French followers liked to call him. And both men were privy to information that made them think a similar chaotic situation might develop in post-revolutionary America.

In 1803, President Jefferson had purchased the Louisiana Territory from Napoleon, which had doubled the size of the American continental domain. The Federalists of New England angrily denounced this acquisition as unconstitutional and unnecessary, claiming that the United States already had more open land than its population could utilize. More to the point, the Yankees found intolerable a future in which the South would be the dominant force in the emerging nation. Led by Senator Timothy Pickering of Massachusetts, who had been secretary of state under President John Adams, the New Englanders began discussing secession. Their spokesmen in Washington asked Vice President Burr what he thought of the idea. He gave

"Alexander Hamilton: The Man Who Made Modern America"
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To celebrate the 200th anniversary of its founding, the New-York Historical Society has announced a new exhibition, an education curriculum, and a public program series focusing on Alexander Hamilton. Among the significant materials on view at the Society's headquarters will be the pistols used by Hamilton and Burr in their duel, original copies of the U.S. Constitution and Declaration of Independence, and rare manuscripts of Hamilton and his contemporaries.

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Burr's bullet tore through Hamilton's liver and lodged in his backbone. He died thirty hours later.

them the distinct impression that if he were elected governor of New York, he was prepared to take the Empire State into the new confederacy.

Hamilton, too, was aware of this bubbling conspiracy. In his lone speech opposing the vice president's run for

a new nation. This was the chief reason Burr challenged Hamilton to the duel: Hamilton was the one man who could compete with him for command of a New England army if civil war broke out. If Hamilton refused Burr's challenge, he would forfeit

that if Napoleon succeeded, he would dismiss the Louisiana Purchase as a scrap of paper and find reasons to start a war with the United States to restore France's colonial empire in North America. In one of the last letters Hamilton wrote, he explained his acceptance of Burr's challenge as a wish "to be in the future useful... in these crises of our affairs which seem likely to happen." Previously he had instructed the editor of the *New York Evening Post*, the newspaper he had helped found, to issue a statement that he would never again accept public office "unless called upon in the event of a foreign or a civil war."

Showdown

At a Fourth of July dinner attended by both Hamilton and Burr seven days before the duel, General Hamilton sprang up on the table and sang his favorite song:

*Why, soldiers, why
Should we be
melancholy, boys?
Why, soldiers, why
Whose business is to die!*

Colonel Burr's reaction to this bravado was a saturnine glare.

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governor, the general dwelt at length on the danger of Burr winning control of this new nation.

The Threat of Secession

Even without New York, the possibility of New England's secession remained strong. Senator Pickering talked of negotiating a treaty with Great Britain that would unite New England and Canada in

his claim as a military leader.

A second reason for the challenge was the way Napoleon was spending the \$15 million that Jefferson had paid him for Louisiana. The "man of destiny" had gathered an army of 200,000 men and a huge flotilla of shallow draft gunboats to invade England and end its struggle for world supremacy by dictating peace in London's ruins. Many thought



Hamilton is buried in the graveyard of Trinity Church in lower Manhattan.

mix of envy and animosity between these two old soldiers. They were ready to gamble a few more bullets, betting on their previous record of survival. After all, only one in five duelists died. The smooth-bore pistols were very inaccurate, even at a duel's standard ten paces.

The antagonists confronted each other in glaring sunlight about 7 a.m. on July 11. The shelf of rock on which they fought has long since vanished, dynamited by railroad builders. Hamilton's second, Colonel Pendleton, won the toss and chose to position the general with his back to the steep cliff. Silhouetted against the sun and the shining river, Burr would be an excellent target.

Hamilton, still mourning his dead son, had told Pendleton and other friends that a

revulsion against dueling had led him to decide to throw away his first "fire." But his remark to Pendleton that he would not set the hair trigger "this time" suggests that he planned to aim at Burr with his second shot.

Hamilton's decision to fire in the air, called a "delope" in duelling terminology, was not entirely altruistic. It would make Burr look like someone who Hamilton thought was not worth killing. It was a kind of insult, as well as a way of belittling the seriousness of Burr's claim of wounded reputation.

Burr's first shot struck Hamilton as he was raising his gun. The impact caused him to convulsively pull the trigger, sending his bullet into an overhanging tree

limb. When the physician who had been waiting at the water's edge reached the general's side, Hamilton gasped, "This is a mortal wound, Doctor."

Contingency Thinking

Is there a modern lesson to be learned from this tragic collision? Even the best-informed men, insiders such as General Hamilton and Colonel Burr, found it difficult to predict what would happen next in an era of turbulent politics. It explains why many contemporary historians have made contingency an important term in their thinking about history—another way of saying that politicians often make large decisions about the future illuminated chiefly by their hopes and fears. ■

Many of the insights for this article originated from the twenty-seven volumes of *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, edited by Harold C. Syrett. Also invaluable were *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, edited by Julian Boyd, and the *Public Papers and Political Correspondence of Aaron Burr*, edited by Mary-Jo Kline. Additional letters and memoranda are in the microfilm edition of *The Papers of Aaron Burr*, also edited by Kline.

For a grasp of the vicious campaign against Burr, the author extensively explored the newspapers in the collection of the New-York Historical Society, notably the *New York Evening Post* and *The American Citizen*. Also at the Society are the Nathaniel Pendleton papers, which shed much light on Hamilton's attitude toward the duel. The Essex Institute Historical Collections have data on Timothy Pickering and the New England secession conspiracy. The Special Collections of Columbia University contain significant material on Mayor DeWitt Clinton, the key player in the assault on Burr's character.

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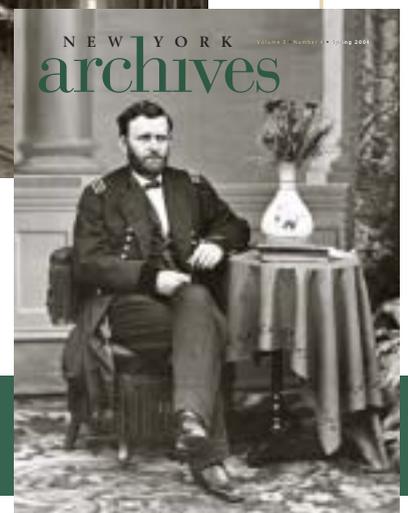
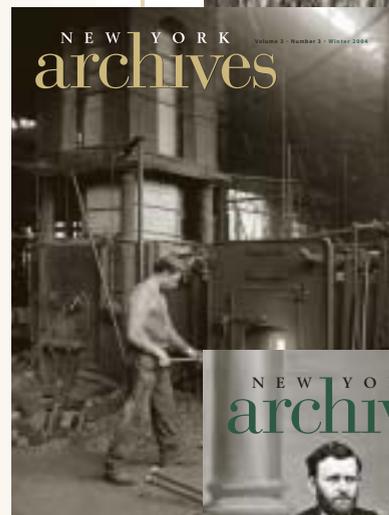
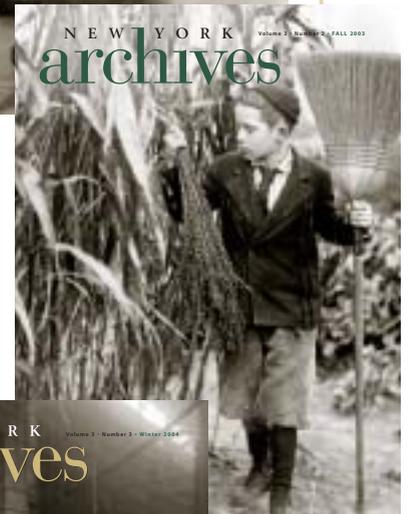
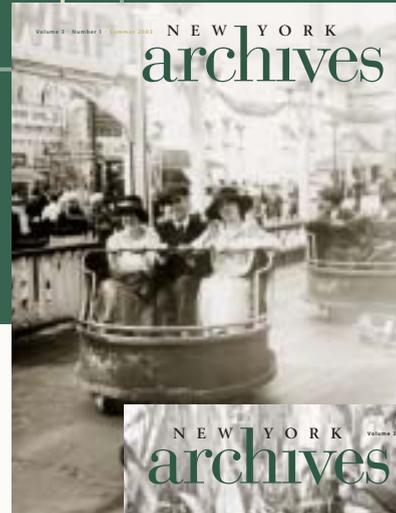
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