

## Duels, Wild Elections and Traitors in American History

In the wee hours of the morning, the Vice President of the United States takes a rowboat across the Hudson River to New Jersey and a former Cabinet Member takes another rowboat to the same location. Both men's hatred of the other has grown over many years of political feuding and they finally are resolved to end the matter once and for all. So, they head for the woods to duel- a match in which one will emerge the winner and one will not emerge at all.

While this sounds like the newest political thriller, it actually is all true. On July 11, 1804 Aaron Burr, the sitting Vice President, and Alexander Hamilton, the former Secretary of the Treasury, head to Weehawken, NJ to settle their longstanding feud. Not to ruin the ending but Alexander Hamilton ends up being shot in the abdomen and dies the next day.

If you would like to learn more about the relationship between Hamilton and Burr, you might want to check out these books available at the Bartholomew County Public Library:

"Duel: Alexander Hamilton, Aaron Burr, and the Future of America" by Thomas Fleming

"Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation" by Joseph Ellis

"Ordeal of Ambition: Jefferson, Hamilton, and Burr" by Jonathan Daniels

This duel and political feud between Hamilton and Burr stem mostly from the Presidential Election of 1800. Thomas Jefferson chose Burr to be his running mate, however this was before the Twelfth Amendment and electors in the Electoral College would cast two votes without distinction as to which was for President and which was for Vice President. The person who received the most votes became President; the person with the 2<sup>nd</sup> most became Vice President. Jefferson's party, the Democratic-Republicans, had a scheme in which all 73 of their electors would vote for Jefferson, but only 72 would vote for Burr. This would make Jefferson the President and Burr the Vice President. However, the electors did not do what they were supposed to and the election ended in a tie. According to the Constitution, the election was thus sent to the House of Representatives to decide. Hamilton started a campaign against Burr which was successful in getting the House to vote Jefferson as the third President of the United States.

Obviously there is much more to the story of the election of 1800. If you want to learn more, you might find these books to be of interest:

"A Magnificent Catastrophe" by Edward Larson

"Adams Vs. Jefferson" by John Ferling

"Jefferson's Second Revolution" by Susan Dunn

I have always felt that Aaron Burr is one of the most interesting characters in American history. Not only does he make the history books for his role in the election of 1800 and the duel with Alexander Hamilton, but he was also tried for treason. It was claimed that Burr was conspiring with the senior officer of the U.S. Army and Governor of the Louisiana Territory, General James Wilkinson to separate the "western" states and set up an empire. Burr was eventually acquitted of all charges, but historians still debate Burr's true role. Was he a traitor? I will leave you with the following books for you to decide yourself:

"Fallen Founder: A Life of Aaron Burr" by Nancy Isenberg

"The Great American Rascal: The Turbulent Life of Aaron Burr" by Phillip Vail

"Burr" by Gore Vidal- a fictionalized account

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