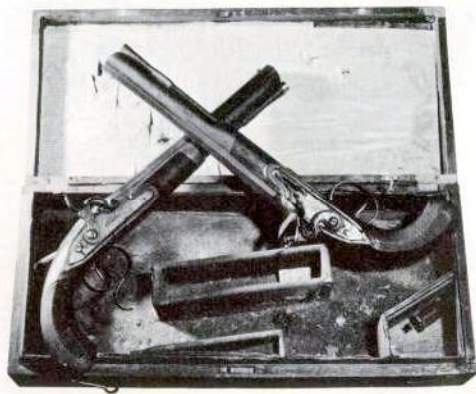




Alexander Hamilton & Aaron Burr
The duel

In the early morning hours of July 11, 1804, Burr and Hamilton departed by separate boats from Manhattan and rowed across the Hudson River to a spot known as the Heights of Weehawken in New Jersey, a popular dueling ground below the towering cliffs of the Palisades. Hamilton and Burr agreed to take the duel to Weehawken because dueling had been outlawed in New York (The same site was used for 18 known duels between 1700 and 1845.).[13] In an attempt to prevent the participants from being prosecuted, procedures were implemented to give all witnesses plausible deniability. For example, the pistols were transported to the island in a portmanteau, enabling the rowers (who also stood with their backs to the duelists) to say under oath that they had not seen any pistols.



Burr, William P. Van Ness (his second), Matthew L. Davis, and another (often identified as Swartwout) plus their rowers reached the site first at half past six, whereupon Burr and Van Ness started to clear the underbrush from the duelling ground. Hamilton, Judge Nathaniel Pendleton (his second), and Dr. David Hosack arrived a few minutes before seven. Lots were cast for the choice of position and which second should start the duel, both of which were won by Hamilton's second who chose the upper edge of the ledge (which faced the city) for Hamilton.[14] However, according to historian and author Joseph Ellis, since Hamilton had been challenged, he had choice of both weapon and position. It was Hamilton himself that chose the upstream or north side position.[15]

All first-hand accounts of the duel agree that two shots were fired; however, Hamilton and Burr's seconds disagreed on the intervening time between the shots. It was common for both principals in a duel to fire a shot at the ground to exemplify courage, and then the duel could come to an end. Hamilton purposely fired first, into the air (which was proven by the presence of a freshly shot tree limb above and behind Burr), without hitting Burr. Burr, rather than adhering to the common dueling format, shot and hit Hamilton in the lower abdomen above the right hip. The bullet ricocheted off Hamilton's second or third false rib—fracturing it—and caused considerable damage to his internal organs, particularly his liver and diaphragm before becoming lodged in his first or second lumbar vertebra. According to Pendleton's account, Hamilton collapsed immediately, dropping the pistol involuntarily, and Burr moved toward Hamilton in a speechless manner (which Pendleton deemed to be indicative of regret) before being hustled away behind an umbrella by Van Ness because Hosack and the rowers were already approaching. Burr returned on his barge and had breakfast in Manhattan. According to Van Ness, he ate eggs and toast.[16]

It is entirely uncertain which principal fired first, as both seconds' backs were to the duel in accordance with the pre-arranged regulations of the duel (and also so the men could later testify that they "saw no fire"). After much research to determine the actual events of the duel, Pulitzer-prize winning historian Joseph J. Ellis gives his interpretation:

Hamilton did fire his weapon intentionally, and he fired first. But he aimed to miss Burr, sending his ball into the tree above and

behind Burr's location. In so doing, he did not withhold his shot, but he did waste it, thereby honoring his pre-duel pledge. Meanwhile, Burr, who did not know about the pledge, did know that a projectile from Hamilton's gun had whizzed past him and crashed into the tree to his rear. According to the principles of the code duello, Burr was perfectly justified in taking deadly aim at Hamilton and firing to kill.[15]

[edit] Dr. David Hosack's account

Dr. David Hosack, the physician, wrote his account on August 17, about one month after the duel had taken place. Hosack testified that he had only seen Hamilton and the two seconds disappear "into the wood", heard two shots, and rushed to find a wounded Hamilton when his name was called. Hosack also testified that he had not seen Burr, who had been hidden behind an umbrella by Van Ness, his second.[17] In a letter to William Coleman, Dr. Hosack gives a very clear picture of the events:

“ When called to him upon his receiving the fatal wound, I found him half sitting on the ground, supported in the arms of Mr. Pendleton. His countenance of death I shall never forget. He had at that instant just strength to say, 'This is a mortal wound, doctor;' when he sunk away, and became to all appearance lifeless. I immediately stripped up his clothes, and soon, alas I ascertained that the direction of the ball must have been through some vital part. His pulses were not to be felt, his respiration was entirely suspended, and, upon laying my hand on his heart and perceiving no motion there, I considered him as irrecoverably gone. I, however, observed to Mr. Pendleton, that the only chance for his reviving was immediately to get him upon the water. We therefore lifted him up, and carried him out of the wood to the margin of the bank, where the bargemen aided us in conveying him into the boat, which immediately put off. During all this time I could not discover the least symptom of returning life. I now rubbed his face, lips, and temples with spirits of hartshorn, applied it to his neck and breast, and to the wrists and palms of his hands, and endeavoured to pour some into his mouth.[18] ”

Dr. Hosack goes on to say that in a few minutes Hamilton had revived, either from the hartshorn or fresh air. Hosack finishes his letter:

“ Soon after recovering his sight, he happened to cast his eye upon the case of pistols, and observing the one that he had had in his hand lying on the outside, he said, "Take care of that pistol; it is undischarged, and still cocked; it may go off and do harm. Pendleton knows " (attempting to turn his head towards him) 'that I did not intend to fire at him.' 'Yes,' said Mr. Pendleton, understanding his wish, 'I have already made Dr. Hosack acquainted with your determination as to that' He then closed his eyes and remained calm, without any disposition to speak; nor did he say much afterward, except in reply to my questions. He asked me once or twice how I found his pulse; and he informed me that his lower extremities had lost all feeling, manifesting to me that he entertained no hopes that he should long survive.[18] ”

[edit] Statement to the press

Pendleton and Van Ness issued a press statement about the events of the duel. The statement printed out the agreed upon dueling rules and events that transpired, that being given the order to present, both participants were free to open fire. After first fire had been given, the opposite's second would count to three and the opponent would fire, or sacrifice his shot.[19] Pendleton and Van Ness disagree as to who fired the first shot, but concur that both men had fired "within a few seconds of each other" (as they must have: neither Pendleton nor Van Ness mention counting down).[19]

In Pendleton's amended version of the statement, he and a friend went to the site of the duel the day after Hamilton's death to discover where Hamilton's shot went. The statement reads:

“ They [Mr. Pendleton and an accomplice] ascertained that the ball passed through the limb of a cedar tree, at an elevation of about twelve feet and a half, perpendicularly from the ground, between thirteen and fourteen feet from the mark on which General Hamilton stood, and about four feet wide of the direct line between him and Col. Burr, on the right side; he having fallen on the left.[20] ”

[edit] Hamilton's intentions

In Statement on Impending Duel with Aaron Burr, a letter that Hamilton wrote the night before the duel,[21] Hamilton stated that

he was "strongly opposed to the practice of dueling" for both religious and practical reasons and continued to state:

" I have resolved, if our interview is conducted in the usual manner, and it pleases God to give me the opportunity, to reserve and throw away my first fire, and I have thoughts even of reserving my second fire.[22] "

When Burr later learned of this, he responded: "Contemptible, if true."[23]

In addition, after being mortally wounded, Hamilton, upon regaining consciousness told Dr. Hosack that his gun was still loaded and that "Pendleton knows I did not mean to fire at Col. Burr the first time". This is evidence for the theory that Hamilton intended not to fire, honoring his pre-duel pledge, and only fired accidentally upon being hit.[24]

However, 20th century historians have debated to what extent Hamilton's statements and letter represent his true beliefs, and how much of this was a deliberate attempt to ruin Burr once and for all should worse come to worst and Hamilton fall. An example of this may be seen in what some historians have considered to be deliberate attempts to provoke Burr on the dueling ground, specifically that:

" Hamilton performed a series of deliberately provocative actions to ensure a lethal outcome. As they were taking their places, he asked that the proceedings stop, adjusted his spectacles, and slowly, repeatedly, sighted along his pistol to test his aim.[25]

In addition, Hamilton had been reported as having severe mood swings, characteristic of a manic-depressive starting as early as 1800. If Hamilton was indeed manic-depressive, his intentions for dueling with Burr may have been psychologically delusional.

This, along with Hamilton's conspicuous choice of dueling pistols (the same pair which had once shot a button off of Aaron Burr's coat some five years earlier during a duel with Hamilton's brother-in-law), has caused many historians in recent years to re-examine the circumstances of the engagement and Hamilton's true intentions on the morning of the 11th of July.

[edit] Burr's intentions

Burr was reputed as not being a very good shot, but there is little doubt that he had every intention of seeking full satisfaction from Hamilton by blood.[26] The afternoon after the duel, Burr was quoted as boasting that had his vision not been impaired by the morning mist, he would have shot Hamilton in the heart.[27] According to the account of Jeremy Bentham, who met with Burr in 1808 in England (four years after the fact), Burr claimed to have been certain of his ability to kill Hamilton, and Bentham concluded that Burr was "little better than a murderer."[28]

Towards the end of his life, Burr remarked: "Had I read Sterne more and Voltaire less, I should have known the world was wide enough for Hamilton and me." [29]

There is, however, much evidence in Burr's defense. Had Hamilton apologized for his "despicable opinion of Mr. Burr", [30] all would have been forgotten. However neither principal could avoid the confrontation honorably and thus each was forced into a duel: Burr to regain his honor and Hamilton to sustain his. [31]

Furthermore it should be noted that Burr was unsure of Hamilton's intentions (as historians still are today). Watching Hamilton's shot soar through the air into the brush above his head, Burr could not be sure if Hamilton had thrown his shot or just missed. According to the principles of the code duello Burr was entirely justified in taking aim at Hamilton. [32]

[edit] The Pistols

Others have attributed Hamilton's apparent misfire to the hair-triggered design of the Wogdon duelling pistols, both of which survive today. Only Hamilton, familiar with the weapons, would have known about and been able to use the hair-trigger. However, when asked by Pendleton before the duel if he would have the "hair-spring" pistol, Hamilton reportedly replied "not this time." [14] The "hair-spring" pistol provided an advantage because it took less time to fire, being more sensitive to the movement of the trigger finger.

The pistols belonged to Hamilton's brother-in-law, John Barker Church, who was a business partner of both Hamilton and Burr. He purchased the pistols in London in 1797. They had previously been used in a 1799 duel between Church and Burr, in which neither man was injured. In 1801, Hamilton's son, Philip, used them in the duel in which he died. In 1930 the pistols were sold to the Chase Manhattan Bank, now preserved by JPMorgan Chase & Co. The guns are on display in the Executive Conference center of 277 Park Avenue in Manhattan.

For the United States Bicentennial anniversary in 1976, Chase Manhattan allowed the pistols to be removed and loaned to the U.S. Bicentennial Society of Richmond. When the original pistol was examined, the concealed hair trigger was discovered.[33]

[edit] Aftermath

A mortally wounded Hamilton died the following day and was buried in the Trinity Churchyard Cemetery in Manhattan (Hamilton was nominally Episcopalian). Gouverneur Morris, a political ally of Hamilton's, gave the eulogy at his funeral and secretly established a fund to support his widow and children.

Burr was charged with murder in New York and New Jersey, but neither charge reached trial. In Bergen County, New Jersey, a grand jury indicted Burr for murder in November 1804, but the New Jersey Supreme Court quashed the indictment on a motion from Colonel Ogden.[34]

Burr fled to South Carolina, where his daughter lived with her family, but soon returned to Washington, D.C. to complete his term of service as Vice President. He presided over the Samuel Chase impeachment trial "with the dignity and impartiality of an angel and the rigor of a devil." Burr's heartfelt farewell speech in March 1805 moved some of his harshest critics in the Senate to tears.[35]
An 1841 map showing the location of a Hamilton Monument.
An 1841 map showing the location of a Hamilton Monument.

With his political career over, Burr went west, where he allegedly had plans to establish a new empire carved out of the Louisiana territory. However, after General James Wilkinson refused to support Burr and William Eaton informed President Jefferson of Burr's

duplicitous intentions, Burr was charged with treason after being detained in Missouri in the process of recruiting for his coup. He was later acquitted due to lack of physical evidence.

Years later, he returned to New York City to practice law and was tried and acquitted for his role in the duel. He died in 1836 in Staten Island, New York, never having apologized to Hamilton's family.