

The New Nation: Understanding the Burr-Hamilton Duel

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TOP: Alexander Hamilton, bronze sculpture by Kim Crowley, 2004. SECOND: A romanticized view of the Burr-Hamilton duel, July 11, 1804, from an 1890 American history textbook.

In early America, duels were a way to work out problems. Two men with guns would face each other to prove they were brave. Duels were somewhat common. Of all those fights, one is the most famous in American history. It was between Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr.

These men were important government leaders. Hamilton had been secretary of the Treasury. Burr was the vice president of the United States during the fight.

On July 11, 1804, the two men met on a dueling ground in New Jersey. They each had a gun and fired. Hamilton's shot was too high. Burr hit Hamilton in the stomach. Hamilton died the next day.

What could make these two men risk their lives this way?

Hundreds of men faced each other to duel in America during this time period. To understand why, we need to take a closer look at the Burr-Hamilton duel.

What caused the Burr-Hamilton duel?

In 1804, Burr ran for governor of New York. He lost the election. Burr saw a newspaper article with Hamilton's mean comments about him in it. The two men had been political rivals for 15 years. So, Burr decided to challenge Hamilton to a duel.

Sometimes, when government officials lost elections, they initiated duels to help their reputations. They wanted to prove themselves as leaders. Burr hoped to show he was brave.

Was Burr trying to kill Hamilton?

Many duelists didn't want to actually kill the other man. The point of a political duel was to prove a man's honor, not hurt someone.

Many fights were settled through letters, and the duels never even took place. First, the man who had been offended would write a letter to the other man. Then, the other man replied. This could end the fight without a duel.

After Burr's first letter, Hamilton probably didn't expect anything more than letters. Before this, Hamilton had been involved in 10 of these fights. None had ever reached the point of a duel.

Sometimes, a man would force the other man to a duel by making impossible demands. Burr demanded that Hamilton apologize for all of his insults from the past 15 years. Hamilton refused, so Burr challenged him to a duel.

However, Burr probably didn't want to kill Hamilton. In political duels, this often did more harm than good because the duelist could be arrested for murder. Burr faced criminal charges for Hamilton's death. He fled to South Carolina to hide.

Was Hamilton trying to die? Why didn't he just say no to Burr?

Hamilton was in low spirits because his political enemies were in power. His oldest son, Philip, had recently died in a duel defending his father's name. However, deaths weren't common in political duels. So, it is unlikely that Hamilton was trying to die by accepting Burr's challenge.

Hamilton explained his reasoning for dueling in a statement made public after he died. Hamilton said he didn't want to fight Burr because it violated his principles, was against the law, and could harm his family. Still, to preserve his reputation as a leader, Hamilton accepted Burr's challenge.

What happened to Burr?

Burr was never actually punished for Hamilton's death. Most people who fought in political duels weren't charged because they were powerful men. Also, deaths from dueling were not considered to be "common murders."

In 1805, Burr was removed from the office of vice president after President Thomas Jefferson's first term. Burr eventually moved to Europe. He stayed there until returning to New York in 1812 to practice law. He died on September 14, 1836.

Did the Burr-Hamilton duel end dueling in America?

No, but many people spoke out against dueling and demanded that it end. Dueling was already in decline in the North, and Hamilton's death likely furthered its fall. Dueling practices died a slow death throughout the first half of the 19th century, with powerful men using it to their advantage until it was no longer accepted.

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Quiz

- 1 Which sentence from the article is MOST important to include in a summary?
- (A) Hundreds of men faced each other to duel in America during this time period.
 - (B) The point of a political duel was to prove a man's honor, not hurt someone.
 - (C) After Burr's first letter, Hamilton probably didn't expect anything more than letters.
 - (D) Hamilton explained his reasoning for dueling in a statement made public after he died.
- 2 How does the section "Was Hamilton trying to die? Why didn't he just say no to Burr?" support a MAIN idea of the article?
- (A) It explains the legal procedures for deaths from dueling.
 - (B) It explains that Hamilton agreed to the duel to preserve his reputation.
 - (C) It describes Burr's punishment for Hamilton's death.
 - (D) It describes the reasons Hamilton and Burr disliked each other.
- 3 Read the section "Was Burr trying to kill Hamilton?"
- Which selection from the section BEST supports the idea that Burr had not meant to kill Hamilton?
- (A) Many fights were settled through letters, and the duels never even took place. First, the man who had been offended would write a letter to the other man.
 - (B) After Burr's first letter, Hamilton probably didn't expect anything more than letters. Before this, Hamilton had been involved in 10 of these fights.
 - (C) Burr demanded that Hamilton apologize for all of his insults from the past 15 years. Hamilton refused, so Burr challenged him to a duel.
 - (D) In political duels, this often did more harm than good because the duelist could be arrested for murder. Burr faced criminal charges for Hamilton's death.
- 4 Based on the article, which of the following statements is TRUE?
- (A) Aaron Burr was jailed for the death of Alexander Hamilton.
 - (B) Hamilton had fought in many duels and enjoyed them.
 - (C) Before their famous duel Burr and Hamilton were good friends.
 - (D) Burr moved to Europe after being removed from his job.