



THOMAS JEFFERSON AND AARON BURR: PEOPLE, PLACES AND POLITICS

Aaron Burr (1801-1805)

Aaron Burr was born at Newark, New Jersey, on February 6, 1756. His father, Aaron Burr, Sr., was a highly respected clerical scholar who served as pastor of the Newark First Presbyterian Church and as president of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University). His mother, Esther Edwards Burr, was the daughter of the noted Puritan theologian and scholar, Jonathan Edwards, who is most often remembered for his passionate and fiery sermons. The family moved to Princeton when the college relocated there soon after the future vice president's birth, but Burr did not remain there long. His father contracted a fever and died when young Aaron was only a year-and-a-half old. His mother and her parents died soon thereafter. An orphan by the age of two, Burr and his older sister, Sally, moved to Philadelphia, where they lived with family friends until 1759, when their uncle, Timothy Edwards of Stockbridge, Massachusetts, became their legal guardian.

Edwards and his young wards moved to Elizabeth Town, New Jersey, the following year. Uncle Timothy soon discovered that Esther's "Little dirty Noisy Boy" had inherited much of the Edwards family's renowned intellect but little of their piety. High-spirited, independent, precocious and self-confident, young Aaron at first studied with a private tutor. In 1769 he began his studies at the College of New Jersey, graduating in 1772. In 1773, he enrolled in the Reverend Joseph Bellamy's school at Bethlehem, Connecticut, to prepare for the ministry but soon realized that he could neither wholly accept the Calvinist discipline of his forebears nor forgo the distractions of the town. He had, his authorized biographer relates, "come to the conclusion that the road to Heaven was open to all alike." In May 1774, he moved to Litchfield, Connecticut, to study law under his brother-in-law, Tapping Reeve, but the outbreak of the American Revolution interrupted his studies.

Burr joined the march on Quebec as an uncompensated "gentleman volunteer" in the summer of 1775. His bravery under fire during the ill-fated assault on that heavily fortified city on December 31, 1775, won him a coveted appointment as an aide to the American commander in chief, General George Washington, but he was almost immediately reassigned to General Israel Putnam. Burr served as Putnam's aide until 1777, when he finally received a commission as a lieutenant colonel and command of his own regiment. Washington seems to have taken an immediate dislike to his ambitious young aide, and Burr appears to have reciprocated this sentiment. When Washington ordered the court-martial of General Charles Lee for dilatory conduct at the battle of Monmouth Courthouse, New Jersey, in June 1778, Burr sided with Lee. His own regiment had suffered heavy losses during the engagement after Washington ordered Burr to hold an exposed position in the blazing ninety-six-degree heat. But notwithstanding his dislike for Colonel Burr, Washington respected his abilities,

assigning him the difficult but crucial task of determining the future movements of the British forces in New York . Burr later commanded the troops stationed at Westchester , New York , imposing a rigid but effective discipline that brought order to the frontier outpost where unruly soldiers and footloose marauders had formerly terrorized the nearby settlers. Burr resigned his commission in early 1779, his health broken by the accumulated stresses of several exhausting campaigns. He always took pride in his military record, and for the remainder of his long life, admirers referred to him as "Colonel Burr." Of his many accomplishments, only two are memorialized on the stone that marks his grave: Colonel in the Army of the Revolution, and Vice President of the United States .

Aaron Burr lived an unsettled existence after leaving the army, travelling about the countryside, visiting friends and family, and studying law as his health permitted. In 1782, he began his legal practice and married Theodosia Bartow Prevost, the widow of a British army officer. In November 1783, the Burr family—which included his wife's two sons by her first husband and an infant daughter, named Theodosia for her mother—moved to New York after British forces evacuated the city. Burr lavished special attention on his only child, carefully supervising her education and cultivating her intellect. Young "Theo," in turn, idolized her father, and she became his closest confidante after her mother died in 1794.

In 1791, Governor Clinton helped orchestrate Burr's election to the U. S. Senate, unseating Senator Philip Schuyler and making a lifelong enemy of Schuyler's son-in-law, Alexander Hamilton.

In 1796, the determined senator set his sights on the vice-presidency, and—in a striking departure from eighteenth-century electoral etiquette—began an energetic campaign to secure the support of his fellow Republicans. On June 26, 1796, the Republican caucus endorsed him as their vice-presidential candidate, although, as Burr's biographers have noted, "For their party's vice-presidential nomination, the Republicans were less unified than in their determination that [Thomas Jefferson] was the man to head their party's drive to oust the `aristocrats.'" Republicans concentrated on capturing the presidency but succeeded only in electing Thomas Jefferson vice president. Over half of the electors who voted for Jefferson failed to cast their second votes for Burr, who finished a disappointing fourth with only thirty electoral votes.

In 1800, Republican strategists hoped to cement their fledgling coalition by seeking, for geographical balance, a New Yorker as their vice-presidential candidate. One obvious choice was New York 's elder statesman, George Clinton, but his reluctance to enter the race cleared the way for Burr's unanimous nomination by the Republican caucus on May 11, 1800.

In 1800, as in the three previous presidential elections, each elector cast two votes without distinguishing between presidential and vice-presidential candidates. Republican strategists expected that all of their electors would cast one vote for Jefferson and that

most—enough to guarantee that Burr would receive the second highest number of votes but not enough to jeopardize Jefferson's margin—would cast their second votes for Burr.

Jefferson and Burr, whether by neglect or miscalculation, would each receive 73 electoral votes. The election would be decided by the House of Representatives, as provided in Article II, section 1, of the Constitution, which directed that "if there be more that one [candidate] who have such a majority, and have an equal Number of Votes, then the House of Representatives shall immediately chuse by Ballot one of them for President," with "each State having one Vote." The representatives from each state would poll their delegation to determine how their state would cast its single vote, with deadlocked states abstaining.

As soon as the outcome of the election became apparent, but before Congress met to count the electoral votes on February 11, 1801, the Federalists began a last-ditch effort to defeat Jefferson. Some, while resigned to a Republican victory, believed that the less-partisan and more flexible Burr was by far the lesser of two evils. Others supported Burr in the hope that, if a deadlock could be prolonged indefinitely, the Federalist-dominated Congress could resolve the impasse with legislation authorizing the Senate to elect a Federalist president—a hope that had no constitutional basis but demonstrated the uncertain temper of the times. Alexander Hamilton, a prominent New York Federalist, actively opposed Burr, repeatedly attempting to convince his colleagues that Burr was a man whose "public principles have no other spring or aim than his own aggrandisement." Burr never explained his role in the drama that subsequently unfolded in the House of Representatives, which cast thirty-six ballots before finally declaring Jefferson the winner on February 17, 1801.

On March 4, 1801, Senate President pro tempore James Hillhouse (F-CT) administered the oath of office to Burr in the Senate chamber on the ground floor of the new Capitol in Washington. The new vice president offered a brief extemporaneous address of "about three sentences," which the press ignored in favor of Jefferson's elegant and conciliatory inaugural address. Burr assumed the president's chair and administered the oath of office to the newly elected senators who presented their credentials.

Burr soon abandoned any hope of winning renomination to a second term. In early 1804, he called on Jefferson to inform him that he recognized "it would be for the interest of the republican cause for him to retire; that a disadvantageous schism would otherwise take place," but he was concerned that "were he to retire, it would be said that he shrunk from the public sentence." He would need, Burr suggested, "some mark of favor . . . which would declare to the world that he retired with [Jefferson's] confidence." Jefferson replied that he had not attempted to influence the 1800 election on his own or Burr's behalf, nor would he do so in the next election—a cool rejoinder that masked his now considerable resentment of the man whom, he claimed, he had "habitually cautioned Mr. Madison against trusting too much." The Republicans ultimately settled on George Clinton as their new vice-presidential candidate. Burr retired from national politics, without Jefferson's "mark of favor," entering the 1804 New York gubernatorial race in a desperate attempt to restore his rapidly failing career.

Burr entered the gubernatorial race as an independent and actively sought Federalist support when it became apparent that the Federalists would not offer a candidate of their own. But Alexander Hamilton was soon "intriguing for any candidate who can have a chance of success against A.B." Burr plunged enthusiastically into the campaign, delivering speeches and distributing campaign literature, but he could not overcome the liabilities he had acquired since 1800. He lost the election by an overwhelming 8,000-vote margin.

Burr's defeat left him bitter and disillusioned. He blamed Hamilton for his predicament, and when he learned that his rival and former ally had referred to him, at a private dinner party, as a "dangerous man, and who ought not to be trusted," he demanded an explanation. The conflict escalated, as Burr and Hamilton exchanged a series of letters, and finally came to a head on June 27, 1804, when Burr challenged Hamilton to a duel. The grim engagement took place on July 11 at Weehawken, New Jersey, and resulted in Hamilton's death the following day.

The forty-nine-year-old former vice president was heavily in debt at the time of his forced retirement from politics. He had been involved in a number of speculative ventures throughout his career, many of which had resulted in substantial losses.

The full extent of Burr's business and other ventures in the West will probably never be known, but his first undertaking appears to have been the Indiana Canal Company. Burr and his fellow investors intended to construct a canal to circumvent the Ohio River rapids at Louisville, but, as his biographers have explained, the resourceful vice president had "more than one plan for the future but several alternate ones depending on change and history." His most ambitious scheme was contingent upon the outbreak of war with Spain, which was still in possession of West Florida and Mexico and increasingly hostile toward the burgeoning new nation that pressed along its eastern border. Burr planned an assault on Mexico and anticipated that the western states would leave the Union to join in a southeastern confederacy under his leadership. One of Burr's accomplices, Louisiana Governor James Wilkinson, betrayed the conspiracy before Burr could begin his expedition, and the former vice president was arrested on charges of treason. Chief Justice John Marshall presided over Burr's trial, which opened on August 3, 1807, in Richmond, Virginia. The jury, guided by Marshall's written opinion that two witnesses must testify to a specific, overt act to establish treason—a standard that the prosecution failed to meet—ultimately found "that Aaron Burr is not proved to be guilty under this indictment." Pressed by debts and fearful of further prosecution, Burr departed for Europe under an assumed name in June 1808.

Burr reappeared in New York in June 1812, ready to resume his legal career. He eagerly looked forward to a reunion with his beloved "Theo" and his grandson Aaron Burr Alston but soon learned that young "Gampy," as Burr called his namesake, had died. In late December 1812, the grief-stricken Theo set out from her home in Georgetown, South Carolina, to visit her father in New York and was never seen again. The schooner that carried Theodosia Burr Alston and her escort probably sank in a storm off Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, but the mysterious circumstances of her disappearance, and the

controversy and mystery that always dogged Burr's career, spawned legends that the unfortunate Mrs. Alston had been forced to walk the plank by pirates or mutineers, or was still alive as a prisoner in the West Indies. Although devastated by his daughter's death, Burr continued to practice law and to supervise the education of his young wards. In 1829, he petitioned the government for a pension based on his military service during the Revolution, a crusade that continued until his plea was finally granted in 1834. He became progressively more eccentric and impoverished as the years passed.

In 1833, Aaron Burr married a second time. His new bride, a wealthy widow with a past almost as controversial as his own, soon became disenchanted with her husband when she discovered that he had mismanaged her assets, and she divorced him the following year. Incapacitated by a series of strokes in 1834, Burr lived on the charity of friends and relatives until his death at Port Richmond, Staten Island, on September 14, 1836. Aaron Burr was buried with military honors at Princeton, New Jersey, on September 16, 1836.