

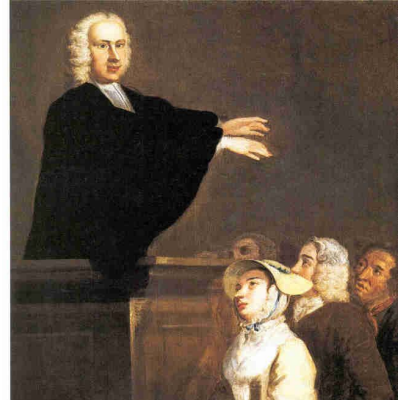
Prompt 5.8 - The Truth about Burr

Warm-up: Are most stories **biased** (unfair) against the villain? Why?

Burr's Childhood

Today, Aaron Burr is largely remembered as the “Fallen Founder” and the villain in the play, “Hamilton.” However, historical records suggest that Aaron Burr may have been more like us than any other founding father. Could it be possible that Burr simply fell victim to historical bias?

Like Hamilton, Aaron Burr was born an orphan due to his father's death when Burr was 2 years old. Unlike Hamilton, however, Burr was born into a prestigious, wealthy family. Burr's father was the founder of Princeton University and Burr's grandfather was the famous minister from The Great Awakening, Jonathan Edwards.



His Beliefs

Although Hamilton claimed that Burr held no beliefs, Burr's beliefs were way ahead of his time. Although Burr owned slaves for part of his life, he later voiced his disapproval of slavery and helped pass laws to make slavery illegal in the state of New York forever.

Burr also was the only founding father to openly speak in favor of women's rights. He called one of America's first feminists, Mary Wollstonecraft, a “genius” and gave his own beloved daughter the same education typically given to boys. Burr even, albeit unsuccessfully, tried to pass legislation to give women the right to vote. Burr later defended the right to a free press and the rights of immigrants against Hamilton's Federalists. He even fought to give the right to vote to poor citizens who did not own property.

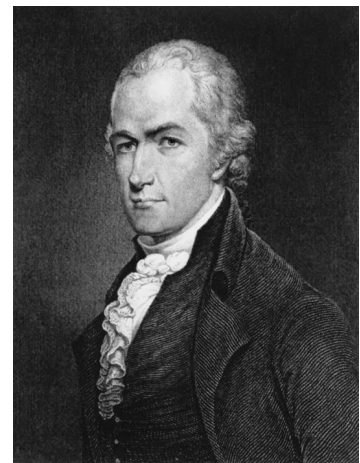
The Hamilton play paints a picture of Burr becoming jealous after not being recognized by Washington in the Battle of Brooklyn. In reality, however, Washington had actually offered Burr a position in his staff, which Burr turned down since he didn't respect Washington as a general.

The Affairs

Like Hamilton, Burr had affairs. During the Revolution, Burr met a woman named Theodosia. She was ten years older and married to a British soldier! While Theodosia's British husband was away, she hosted a party for American soldiers, including Washington, Hamilton, and Burr. At this party, Burr **courted** (dated) Theodosia. Soon after, her husband died in a battle and that's when Burr married her. After the war, the two moved to New York with their Indian servant, Mary, to begin their new lives.

Sadly, their relationship would not last. After defeating Hamilton's father in law, Burr was elected to the US Senate and had to spend time away. Burr brought Mary to the new capital in Philadelphia to help him. At some point, Burr had an affair with Mary while in Philadelphia.

Around this same time, Burr's wife, Theodosia, was diagnosed with stomach cancer and died the same year that Burr's new child with Mary was born. It is possible that neither Theodosia nor the public knew about this affair, since Mary was from India and many racist politicians may have looked down upon Burr for having an affair with her.

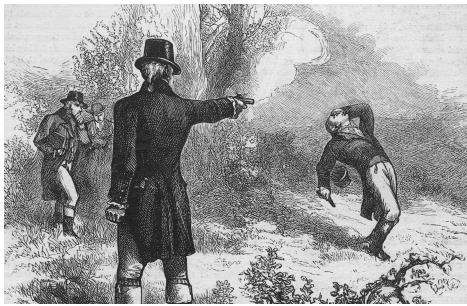


The Election of 1800

By the time Burr was elected to the Senate, many saw him as a rising star. Whereas Jefferson did not try to convince people to vote at all, Burr talked to voters and went door to door making lists of donors.

In the election of 1800, the Republican party picked Burr to run as Jefferson's Vice President. Back then, electors got to vote twice, once for President and once for Vice President. All the votes were then put into the same box and counted. As a result, something odd occurred. Burr and Jefferson finished with the same number of votes. Jefferson's journalists began a rumor that Burr tried to steal the election by convincing someone to vote for Burr twice. Today, evidence shows that Jefferson may have been the one who did this.

Regardless, since there was a tie, the Federalist House needed to decide the winner and, at Hamilton's urging, they picked Jefferson. Many assumed that, as the new Vice President, Burr would eventually become the next President. However, Jefferson wanted his friend, James Madison, instead. So, in 1804, Jefferson dumped Burr and picked Madison instead.



The Duel

After being removed as Vice President, Burr decided to run as governor of New York. However, he would face resistance. Burr's bitterest enemy was Hamilton, who saw Burr as a longstanding rival to his own power in New York. Hamilton hated Burr, and the feeling was mutual. In fact, much of Burr's bad reputation comes from Hamilton's pen.

In the election, Burr decided to switch to Hamilton's Federalist party to try and win. This made Hamilton furious so he wrote insults in the paper about Burr. At this point, Burr had enough so he challenged him to a duel.

Dueling was illegal in New Jersey but it was rarely enforced, so many New Yorkers had illegal duels there. Often, duels were nonviolent: Both parties would fire into the air and everyone would go home in one piece. This duel was different. Accounts conflict as to who shot first, however, it does appear that Hamilton may have intended to kill Burr. Firstly, he switched the guns out to make them heavier. Since Burr had been practicing with a lighter gun, perhaps Hamilton thought that a heavier one would make Burr miss. Ironically, if Hamilton had used lighter pistols, he might have survived. Secondly, Hamilton put on his glasses right before the duel to see Burr better. Regardless, Hamilton was killed.

Treason

Burr's future in politics was over. After the duel, Burr began plans to lead adventurers, like Andrew Jackson and James Wilkenson, out west to try and free Mexico from Spain. Wilkenson had apparently been taking bribes from Spain, however, to convince American territories to break away from The United States. When Wilkenson was caught, he wrote a letter to Jefferson saying that it was all Burr's idea. Burr claimed he knew nothing about this but Jefferson tried Burr for treason anyway. A famous lawyer, Henry Clay, defended Burr and eventually Burr was **acquitted** (freed).



For the rest of Burr's life he became a family lawyer in New York. Sadly, his daughter died at sea soon after and many of our records of Burr were lost in the shipwreck. Today, Hamilton is buried in a famous graveyard in New York while Burr is buried unevenly, as an afterthought, at Princeton. Perhaps if more records of him survived, or had he become President, history may have been kinder to Aaron Burr.

Cooldown: Was Aaron Burr truly a villain? Explain by using at least 2 of the sections you read about.