



Burr vs. Hamilton

In 1804, an escalating war of words between two of America's leading politicians resulted in a fateful meeting that only one would survive. What caused the dispute?

BY KATHY WILMORE

CHARACTERS

DR. CHARLES COOPER, a guest at a dinner party

ALEXANDER HAMILTON, one of the nation's founders; an influential supporter of adopting the Constitution

WILLIAM VAN NESS, a friend of Aaron Burr

AARON BURR, vice president of the United States

ELIZABETH HAMILTON, wife of Alexander Hamilton

NATHANIEL PENDLETON, a friend of Alexander Hamilton

NARRATORS A-E

All characters were real people.

Prologue

NARRATOR A: In 1804, the United States was a very young country, and Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr were two of its most powerful, influential leaders. Hamilton, a trusted aide to General George Washington during the American Revolution, served as the nation's first Secretary of the Treasury.

NARRATOR B: Like Hamilton, Burr had fought the British and was a lawyer who went into politics. In 1800, Burr ran for president but lost to Thomas Jefferson and became his vice president.

NARRATOR C: Hamilton and Burr

were political rivals for many years. But in 1804, their relationship took a turn for the worse . . .

Scene 1

NARRATOR D: At a dinner party in February 1804, Hamilton takes part in a lively conversation about New York politics.

DR. CHARLES COOPER: Aaron Burr wants to be the next governor of New York. You've known him a long time, Mr. Hamilton. What do you think of his candidacy?

ALEXANDER HAMILTON: Not much! When he and Thomas Jefferson ran for president, there was a tie

◀ **The duel between Aaron Burr (left) and Alexander Hamilton (right).**

in electoral votes, so Congress had to decide who'd be president.

COOPER: Yes! We were all in suspense for days.

HAMILTON: I believed Burr would be a disaster as president, so I lobbied against him. He'd be a disaster as governor as well.

NARRATOR E: Cooper later writes a letter to a friend describing people's comments about Burr that night.

Scene 2

NARRATOR A: A few weeks later—soon after Burr loses the election for governor by a wide margin—Cooper's letter is published in the *Albany Register* newspaper.

WILLIAM VAN NESS: Have you seen the papers, Burr? Your old friend



"Hey, yo, I'm just like my country, I'm young, scrappy, and hungry!" raps Alexander Hamilton in a new hit Broadway musical. That's right—he's not just the face on the \$10 bill anymore. *Hamilton*, written by Lin-Manuel Miranda (far right, in the lead role), uses hip-hop and other modern music styles to tell Hamilton's life story, from orphaned immigrant to revolutionary to Founding Father.



Hamilton has been shooting his mouth off again—about you.

AARON BURR: He's no friend of mine. He has never liked me.

What's he saying about me now?

VAN NESS (hands him the paper): According to this, he expressed a "despicable opinion" of you.

BURR: This is an outrage! How dare he insult my reputation!

NARRATOR B: A few days later . . .

HAMILTON: I've just gotten a letter from Burr. This is what happens when I let my guard down. I should have realized that people would gossip.

ELIZABETH HAMILTON: Gossip has a way of turning molehills into mountains. What's the letter say?

A. HAMILTON: Burr demands that I explain myself—to his satisfaction.

E. HAMILTON: He isn't calling for a duel, is he?

A. HAMILTON: No, no, nothing like that. I'll write back and say something soothing. He'll cool down. After all, it's just politics.

NARRATOR C: The men exchange several letters. But Burr gets more upset, not less. In the end, he challenges Hamilton to a duel.

Scene 3

NARRATOR D: On July 10, 1804 . . .

HAMILTON: Tomorrow's the day.

NATHANIEL PENDLETON: It's not too late to change your mind! Think of your son Philip, just 19, who was killed in a duel three years ago.

HAMILTON: Yes, his death tore the heart out of our family. But this is a matter of honor. Refusing to face Burr would brand me a coward. So I'll face him, but I won't shoot him.

PENDLETON: Please reconsider!

HAMILTON: I've made up my mind. Let's just hope that Burr's aim is as bad as mine is going to be!

Scene 4

NARRATOR E: Dueling is against the law, but the punishment is less severe in New Jersey than in New York. So early on the morning of July 11, 1804, the duelists row across the Hudson River to meet in Weehawken, New Jersey.

NARRATOR A: Van Ness and Pendleton assist their friends by checking the weapons and agreeing on the rules. Then Burr and Hamilton stand 10 paces apart, get ready . . .

NARRATOR B: Shots ring out! Hamilton's strikes a tree branch overhead and Burr is unharmed. But Hamilton is badly wounded.

NARRATOR C: Hamilton is carried to the boat, rowed back to New York, and taken to the nearby home of a friend. His wife and seven children gather around his bed, where he lies in terrible pain.

Epilogue

NARRATOR D: Hamilton died the next day. New York held a huge, grand funeral. Many of the nation's leaders attended, and speakers praised Hamilton's patriotism and love of country.

NARRATOR E: Though accused of murder, Burr served out his term as vice president. He later took part in a plot to invade Mexico, for which he was arrested and tried for **treason**. He was found not guilty, but his reputation never recovered.

NARRATOR A: Burr won the duel but is remembered as a murderer and traitor. Hamilton, who lost, is still honored as one of the nation's founding statesmen. ♦



Did dueling settle the dispute between Hamilton and Burr? How else might they have resolved their differences?