

The Fatal Duel



In 1804, as part of an erratic plot by Federalist extremists to cut New England and New York from the Union, Aaron Burr, their complacent tool, was nominated for Governor of New York. Alexander Hamilton denounced Burr's motives in no uncertain terms. Then Burr, giving vent to an insensate jealousy dating back to the Revolution, when his own brilliance was outdazzled by Hamilton's military, intellectual and social genius, eagerly challenged him. As *TIME* would have reported the Burr-Hamilton duel, had *TIME* been issued July 16, 1804:

... Hamilton spent the night putting his house in order. At dawn, he, his second (Nathaniel Pendleton) and one Dr. William Hosack, were rowed from Manhattan to the Weehawken Palisades. It was hot, hazy. The river's oily swell made Mr. Pendleton sick, so Hamilton humorously held his head. Landing, they sought the well-secluded dueling ground not far above the river.

Burr and his second (William Van Ness) were clearing the summer's underbrush. Hamilton and Burr nodded each to the other with a pleasant "Good morning." While the seconds conferred, Hamilton stood gazing across the Hudson, where his family lay still

asleep. He was remembering his son's death on this very spot three years before at the hands of General Baker. Burr sat on a rock smoking a segar. Finally Pendleton asked: "Gentlemen, are you ready?" Burr rose. His beady eyes sparkled but his face was immobile. Pale but resolute, Hamilton took his post, his face a cameo against the green background. Pendleton handed each a loaded pistol. Again: "Gentlemen, are you ready?" "Present!" both replied. Burr fired on the instant. Hamilton rose slowly to his toes, clenched his hands, so unwittingly discharging his pistol, and fell heavily face downward. His bullet flew over Burr's head, clipped a cedar twig which fluttered to his shoulder.

Hamilton, agonizing, was carried to his boat. He murmured: "Take good care of that pistol. It's undischarged. Pendleton knows I didn't intend to fire..."

So, in part, *TIME* would have reported the fatal duel, noting also how Hamilton died the next day at the Greenwich Village home of William Bayard, how his burial in Trinity churchyard was a signal for an unprecedented outpouring of public grief. *TIME* too would have shown how the duel brought Burr's political ruin in the East, turned his schemes toward Louisiana and Mexico.

Cultivated Americans, impatient with cheap sensationalism and windy bias, turn increasingly to publications edited in the historical spirit. These publications, fair-dealing, vigorously impartial, devote themselves to the public weal in the sense that they report what they see, serve no masters, fear no groups.

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