

Burr-Hamilton Duel

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OVERVIEW

Alexander Hamilton had long been suspicious of Aaron Burr, former United States senator and vice president. Hamilton's harsh criticism of Burr in the campaign for governor of New York in 1804 led to Burr's challenging him to a duel. Hamilton reluctantly accepted, and was killed by Burr at Weehawken, New Jersey. Matthew Davis provided an eyewitness account.

GUIDED READING As you read, consider the following questions:

- In this instance, what were the procedures for the duel?
- Who fired first, Hamilton or Burr?

Colonel Burr arrived first on the ground, as had been previously agreed. When General Hamilton arrived, the parties exchanged salutations, and the seconds proceeded to make their arrangements. They measured the distance, ten full paces, and cast lots for the choice of position, as also to determine by whom the word should be given, both of which fell to the second of General Hamilton. They then proceeded to load the pistols in each other's presence, after which the parties took their stations. The gentleman who was to give the word then explained to the parties the rules which were to govern them in firing, which were as follows: "The parties being placed at their stations, the second who gives the word shall ask them whether they are ready; being answered in the affirmative, he shall say—*present!* After this the parties shall present and fire *when they please*. If one fires before the other, the opposite second shall say *one, two, three, fire*, and he shall then fire or lose his fire." He then asked if they were prepared; being answered in the affirmative, he gave the word *present*, as had been agreed on, and both parties presented and fired in succession. The intervening time is not expressed, as the seconds do not precisely agree on that point. The fire of Colonel Burr took effect, and General Hamilton almost instantly fell. Colonel Burr advanced towards General Hamilton with a manner and gesture that appeared to General Hamilton's friend to be expressive of regret; but, without speaking, turned about and withdrew, being urged from the field by his friend, as has been subsequently stated, with a view to prevent his being recognised [*sic*] by the surgeon and bargemen who were then approaching. No further communication took place between the principals, and the barge that carried Colonel Burr immediately returned to the city. We conceive it proper to add,

that the conduct of the parties in this interview was perfectly proper, as suited the occasion.

In the interviews between Mr. Pendleton and Mr. Van Ness, they were not able to agree in two important facts that passed on the ground. Mr. Pendleton expressed a confident opinion that General Hamilton did not fire first, and that he did not fire at all at Colonel Burr. Mr. Van Ness seemed equally confident in opinion that General Hamilton did fire first; and, of course, that it must have been *at* his antagonist.