

This Day in History... July 11, 1804

Burr–Hamilton Duel

On July 11, 1804, former US Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton was mortally wounded in a duel with sitting Vice President Aaron Burr.

Long-time acquaintances during the fight for independence, Hamilton and Burr later became bitter political rivals. When a Burr supporter insulted Hamilton's honor in 1801, his 19-year-old son Philip challenged the man to a duel. Philip Hamilton died of injuries he suffered during the duel, which took place in Weehawken, NJ. Three years later, Burr killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel in the same location with the same pistol used to kill Hamilton's son.

Their rivalry stemmed from the 1800 election, when the Federalists lost the presidency and control of Congress. Thomas Jefferson defeated John Adams but tied with Aaron Burr. Prior to the ratification of the 12th Amendment, each elector voted for two people, and whoever received the most votes became president, while the person in second place became vice president. As such, one elector for the Federalists cast one vote for John Adams, the party's intended president, and one vote for John Jay rather than Charles Pinckney, the Federalists intended vice president. The Democratic-Republicans failed to do the same thing, resulting in the tie. The election was then to be resolved by the House of Representatives in a contingent election, which was controlled by the Federalists (the prior term had not yet ended).



Issued on Hamilton's 200th birthday.

In a lengthy debate, Hamilton convinced his colleagues that Jefferson was "by far not so dangerous a man" as Burr. After deadlocking in 35 ballots, the House of Representatives chose Jefferson by a margin of ten state contingents to four. Although he served one term as vice president, Burr's refusal to concede defeat in 1800 caused Jefferson to replace him with New York Governor George Clinton in the 1804 election.

Aware that he was being replaced as Jefferson's running mate in the 1804 election, Vice President Aaron Burr announced his candidacy for the governorship of New York State. Hamilton campaigned vigorously against him, and Burr lost to Morgan Lewis.

The years of animosity came to a head and Burr formally challenged Hamilton to a duel. Hamilton accepted. Prior to the duel, Hamilton wrote a letter he called *Statement on Impending Duel with Aaron Burr*, in which he wrote, "I have resolved... if our interview is conducted in the usual manner, and it pleases God to give me the opportunity, to reserve and throw away my first fire, and I have thoughts even of reserving my second fire."

The duel came on July 11, 1804, in Weehawken, New Jersey. It's unclear who shot first, but true to his word, Hamilton fired his gun into the air. Burr on the other hand, aimed directly at Hamilton and shot him in the lower abdomen, causing extensive internal injuries.

Hamilton died of his injuries the following day, and Burr was charged with murder and other crimes. Burr was never tried though, instead fleeing to South Carolina briefly and then west, where he allegedly planned to establish a new territory.



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*Hamilton stamp from
the Liberty Series*

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