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Alexander Hamilton's Trick Pistol - I

Lead: Perhaps Alexander Hamilton was not such a hero after all.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Since being shot by Aaron Burr in a duel in 1804, Alexander Hamilton has enjoyed something akin to martyr status. At the crucial moment Hamilton fired over the head of his political and social rival, a man he despised.

Burr then coldly took aim and drilled Hamilton, the bullet finding his

liver and causing the former Secretary of the Treasury's death two days later. This story confirmed Burr's well-established reputation for ruthlessness; he is considered a fascinating and enigmatic figure, but by many, more than a little cruel.

The two men came from different backgrounds. Burr was from a socially prominent family. His grandfather was Jonathan Edwards, the famous New England preacher. Hamilton was a bastard, born on a Caribbean island, who rose to prominence as aide-de-camp to General George Washington. From their first encounters during the Revolutionary War and later in New York state politics, Burr and Hamilton were bitter rivals. Their greatest

struggle came in the high-stakes arena of presidential politics when Aaron Burr and Thomas Jefferson were vying for the position. Hamilton's hatred for Thomas Jefferson was only exceeded by his hatred for Burr, and with Hamilton's support Jefferson won the 1800 election. The two men were also business rivals each holding interest in banks competing for clients in New York. It was only a matter of time before the festering bitterness between the two men exploded into violence. In 1804 an innocuous comment in a letter printed in the *Albany Register* by a clergyman referring to Hamilton's disdain was enough for Burr. He challenged Hamilton to a duel.

This was not the first time Burr had dueled with Hamilton's family. In 1799 on the day before Burr's competing bank had opened in New York, John B. Church, Hamilton's brother-in-law, an experienced dueler who had killed a man in England, deliberately insulted him in front of Burr's friends. Burr challenged him and they fought using Church's pistols. Both missed although a bullet carried away one of Burr's coat buttons. Next time: Hamilton's trick pistol.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

Lindsay, Merrill. "Trick Pistols Shed New Light on Famed Burr-Hamilton Duel," *Smithsonian* 7 (8, November 1976): 94-98.

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