

3

Aaron Burr
(1756-1836)

Again we go back a few years. Jonathan Edwards' first child, Esther, was born in Northampton in 1732. In 1751, she followed her father to Stockbridge. The next year, 1752, being then 20 years of age, she married one Aaron Burr.

This Burr had been born in 1716, and had gone to Yale, graduating in 1735. He was thus 36 years old, fresh out of college, and holding a preaching position at the Presbyterian Church of Newark, at the time of his marriage. The Great Awakening of the 1730's had split the churches. Burr took the same side as Edwards, and with others founded the College of New Jersey in 1746. The first president, Jonathan Dickinson, died the next year (1747). Aaron, who had been teaching at the College, succeeded him. Aaron died on 24 September 1748, and was succeeded by his father-in-law, Jonathan Edwards. As we have just seen, Edwards' own tenure in that position was a very short one.

Esther did not long survive her 1752 marriage. Her father had died of a vaccination against smallpox on 2 March 1758; Esther died of smallpox itself just a month later, on 7 April 1758. Before her death, she had had two children, Aaron Jr and Sarah. It is the former child with whom we are here concerned, and from here on, the name "Aaron Burr" will refer to him.

Aaron Burr, then, was born on 6 February 1756. His was a romantic and also a devious personality. He played his time on the national stage theatrically, seeking a larger influence on events than, as it turned out, he was to have.

After studying theology at the College of New Jersey (which did not become Princeton University until 1896), he joined the Continental Army as an officer in 1775, aged nineteen. His enduring dislike of Washington resulted from Washington's failure to commend his role in the Battle of Princeton, fought on 3 January 1777; arguably the turning point of the war.

In 1778, aged 26, he met Theodosia Prevost, ten years older than himself and then married to Jacques Prevost. He began an affair with her. In 1779 he left the military service to practice law in New York City. In 1782, her husband having conveniently died in Jamaica of yellow fever, he married Theodosia. Besides law, he was active in politics. In 1785, as a member of the New York Assembly, he supported a bill to end slavery. Such was his sense of the future. The nation was indeed headed that way, but it had not yet quite arrived there.

In 1781, reaching higher than New York, he was elected to the U S Senate, where he would serve until 1797. He ran for President in 1800, and the vote came down to a tie between him and Jefferson. The House of Representatives decided on Jefferson, with Burr becoming Vice President under him. Jefferson never trusted Burr, and gave him little to do during his presidency. There also followed Burr's duel with Hamilton. When Jefferson ran for his second term, in 1804, he dropped Burr and chose George Clinton as his Vice President.

The duel was nothing if not theatrical, but just what was the issue between the two? Burr, knowing he would not be on the ticket in 1804, had run for the Governorship of New York. There was a smear campaign against him, led by Hamilton and the then New York governor, George Clinton. Burr accused Hamilton, and the two exchanged letters before they agreed to have a duel. Duelling was illegal, but the traditional code of honor was still widely accepted. In the event, Hamilton seems to have followed his announced intention not to aim at his opponent. Burr did otherwise, and Hamilton died. The code of honor still commanded enough respect that Burr was never charged with a crime.

The Louisiana Purchase had been made from Spain in 1802. After the end of his Vice-Presidential term in 1804, Burr traveled to the new territory, intending to make his own settlement. He leased 40,000 acres in present-day Louisiana, and began to train a private army to defend it. He made contact with James Wilkinson, Governor of the Territory, and Harman Blennerhassett, who offered his island in the Ohio River to train the army. Andrew Jackson, who like Burr saw war with Spain as a possibility, supported Burr. But Wilkinson betrayed Burr's plan to President Jefferson, who charged Burr with treason. He was arrested on 19 February 1807. The only evidence against him turned out to be a letter forged by Wilkinson, and the ludicrous case was rightly dismissed.

He was once again legally in the clear, but there are other things than legal. Out of money, his reputation at an end, Burr left for a self-imposed exile in England in 1808, traveling also in Europe. He returned in 1812, lived quietly under his mother's maiden name, Edwards, and returned to his law practice. His last home was on Staten Island, and there he died on 14 September 1836. He was buried near his father, the senior Aaron Burr, in Princeton, New Jersey.



Here is Burr in 1793, as a U S Senator. He wanted things to go a little faster than they were going. He believed in female equality, and educated his own daughter Theodosia. We have mentioned his bill, in the New York Assembly, for the abolition of slavery. He had similarly supported female suffrage.

And as for where the nation was actually going, and how it would get there, that will presently appear. We now skip ahead a quarter of a century.