

DUELING AS POLITICS: THE BURR- HAMILTON DUEL

JOANNE B. FREEMAN

ON JULY 11, 1804, Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr fought what was to become the most famous duel in American history. This day of reckoning had been long approaching, for Hamilton had bitterly opposed Burr's political career for fifteen years. Charismatic men of great talent and ambition, the two had been thrust into competition with the opening of the national government and the sudden availability of new power, positions, and acclaim. Their rivalry continued even after they had been cast off the national stage and were competing in the more limited circle of New York State politics; by 1804, Burr had been summarily ejected from the U.S. vice presidency and Hamilton had self-destructed with a fool-hardy pamphlet attacking his own party's candidate for president.

Burr, however, seemed to have larger ambitions, courting Federalists throughout New England to unite behind him and march towards secession — or so Hamilton thought — and Burr's first step on that path appeared to be the gubernatorial election of 1804. Horrified that Burr could become New York's chief Federalist, corrupt the Federalist party, sabotage Hamilton's influence, and possibly destroy the republic, Hamilton stepped up his opposition. Anxious to discredit Burr, he attacked his private character, denouncing him as “one who ought not to be trusted with the reins of government.”¹

Burr was keenly aware of Hamilton's opposition and was no longer willing to overlook it, for the 1804 election was his last hope for political power. From the reports of his friends and the pages of the *American Citizen*, he knew that Hamilton was whispering about him.

He assumed (wrongly) that Hamilton had written several of the venomous pamphlets attacking him in recent years, and reportedly swore to “call out the first man of any respectability concerned in the infamous publications.” By January 1804, *Citizen* editor James Cheetham was publicly daring Burr to challenge Hamilton to a duel.²

Burr was thus quick to respond when he discovered concrete evidence of Hamilton’s antagonism in a letter published in the Republican *Albany Register*. After noting Hamilton’s opposition to Burr, the writer, Charles D. Cooper, assured his correspondent that he “could detail . . . a still more despicable opinion which General Hamilton has expressed of Mr. Burr.” Though Cooper only hinted at an offensive personal insult, Burr seized on this remark as provocation for an affair of honor—a ritualized dispute to redeem a man’s reputation—and demanded an explanation from Hamilton.³

Hamilton did not want to duel. His reluctance is apparent in his ambivalent and conflicted response to Burr’s letter. To appease his moral and religious reservations about dueling, he attempted to placate Burr with an elaborate discussion of the “infinite shades” of meaning of the word “despicable”—a grammar lesson that Burr found evasive, manipulative, and offensive. To defend his personal honor and political power, he countered Burr’s insultingly vague inquiry by pronouncing it “inadmissible” and declaring himself willing to “abide the consequences” should Burr persist in his present course—a statement that Burr found insufferably arrogant. Outraged at Hamilton’s seeming lack of respect, Burr ultimately broadened his demands, and after roughly eight days of negotiation, he issued a challenge, which Hamilton accepted.

The logic behind both men’s actions has largely eluded historians. What prevented Hamilton from ending the affair with an apology or an explanation? And why did Burr instigate a duel on such dubious grounds? Many have attributed these self-destructive decisions to emotional excess, suggesting that Hamilton was suicidal and Burr malicious and murderous. Admittedly, both Hamilton and Burr were haunted by private demons. Though born at opposite ends of the social spectrum, each spent his adult life challenging the confines of his ancestry—for Hamilton, his illegitimacy, and for Burr, the saintly mantle of his famed grandfather, the theologian Jonathan Edwards. Yet, though personal insecurities may have made Hamilton and Burr likely duelists, they do not explain how the men justified the duel to themselves.⁴ Nor do quirks of personality explain the hundreds of other political duels fought in early national America. Only by entering the world of the political duelist can we fully understand the final fatal encounter between Hamilton and Burr.⁵

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Certainly, neither man considered the duel unprecedented; both had already fought several honor disputes. Burr had been involved in three prior conflicts, two of them with Hamilton and one with Hamilton's brother-in-law, John Barker Church (which ended in a duel without injuries). Hamilton had been involved in *ten* such disputes before his final clash with Burr, all of them settled during negotiations without ever reaching a dueling ground.⁶ As a partisan leader (and a particularly controversial one), Hamilton attracted more than his share of abuse. Yet his involvement in honor disputes was not unique. In New York City, Hamilton's adopted home, there were at least sixteen political affairs of honor between 1795 and 1807. As one New York newspaper noted in 1802, "Duelling is much in fashion."⁷ Clearly, the Burr-Hamilton duel was no great exception; it was part of a larger trend.

MOST OF THESE CLASHES have been long overlooked because they did not result in a challenge or gunplay. As in countless other cases, these disputes involved the exchange of ritualized letters mediated by "seconds"—friends of the "principals"—in which the aggrieved principal attempted to redeem his reputation in a manner that was acceptable to his attacker. Politicians considered themselves involved in an affair of honor from the first "notice" of an insult to the final acknowledgment of "satisfaction," a process that sometimes took weeks or even months. Regardless of whether shots were fired, these ritualized negotiations were an integral part of a duel.⁸

As suggested by these formal exchanges, early national political duels were demonstrations of manner, not marksmanship; they were intricate games of dare and counter dare, ritualized displays of bravery, military prowess, and—above all—willingness to sacrifice one's life for one's honor. A man's response to the threat of gunplay bore far more meaning than the exchange of fire itself; indeed, most conflicts waned during negotiations and concluded when each principal felt that his honor had been vindicated.⁹ And disputes that progressed to the field of honor did not necessarily result in a fatality. Many involved no bloodshed, or at most, a "fashionable" wound in the leg.¹⁰ The occasional fatality was an unfortunate fact of public life, acceptable if the duel had been fair and the participants had adhered to the honor code. Contrary to twenty-first century expectations, political dueling was not a southern ritual of violence aimed at maiming or killing adversaries. While Burr and Hamilton were

well aware that they were risking their lives on a dueling ground, neither man assumed that he would *inevitably* kill or be killed. Nor were they necessarily murderous or suicidal.

So why did they fight? Careful study of political dueling patterns offers a tantalizing explanation. Most such disputes occurred in the weeks following an election or political controversy. Usually, the loser or a member of the losing faction—the group dishonored by defeat—provoked a duel with the winner or a member of the winning faction; rather than the result of sudden flares of temper, such duels were deliberately provoked partisan battles. If the dispute resulted in gunplay, the two seconds often published conflicting newspaper accounts, each man boasting of his principal's bravery. Fought to influence a broad public, synchronized with the events of the political timetable, political duels conveyed carefully scripted political messages. They enabled dishonored and discredited leaders to redeem their wounded reputations with displays of character.¹¹

Burr followed this logic in 1804. After the personal abuse and public humiliation of a lost election, he sought a duel with Hamilton to redeem his honor and reassert his merit as a leader. If Burr did not defend his name and receive some sign of respect from Hamilton—either an apology or the satisfaction of a duel—he would lose the support of his followers. As Burr's second, William Van Ness, explained, if Burr "tamely sat down in silence, and dropped the affair what must have been the feelings of his friends?—they must have considered him as a man, not possessing sufficient firmness to defend his own character, and consequently unworthy of their support."¹² To remain a political leader, Burr had to defend his honor.

Highly offended principals like Burr sometimes insisted on dueling; some dire insults could be dispelled only with an extreme display of bravery. In such cases, to draw negotiations to a quick but courteous close, the offended party usually demanded an apology that was too humiliating for the offender to accept. Such was Burr's logic. Outraged by Hamilton's seemingly insulting response to his initial letter of inquiry, Burr eventually concluded that nothing but an actual duel would dispel the insult, so he demanded an apology for *all* of Hamilton's insults from throughout their fifteen-year rivalry. As Burr expected, Hamilton rejected this humiliating demand and accepted Burr's challenge.

Burr initiated an honor dispute with Hamilton to redeem his reputation, not to commit murder. Indeed, killing one's opponent was



Photographer unknown.
Grave of Alexander Hamilton, Trinity Churchyard. Platinum photograph. Gift of Samuel V. Hoffman, 1922. (PR 020)

more of a liability than an advantage, leaving a duelist open to charges of bloodthirstiness and personal ambition—as Burr would discover after his encounter with Hamilton.¹³ Nor was Burr seeking revenge for a mysterious secret insult. Modern writers love to speculate about Hamilton’s “real” insult, the most popular suggestion being that Hamilton accused Burr of sleeping with his own daughter, Theodosia.¹⁴ As appealingly sensational as that claim might be, it is grounded on twentieth-first century assumptions that only an affront of such severity could drive a man to duel. But if we understand duels as political weapons deliberately deployed by countless politicians, such theories make no sense. There is no deep, dark, mysterious insult at the heart of the Burr-Hamilton duel. Like other politicians, Burr was manipulating the code of honor to redeem his reputation after the humiliation of a lost election, seizing on Hamilton’s insult in the *Albany Register* because it was in writing, vague as it might be.

HAMILTON’S MOTIVES FOR FIGHTING were more conflicted. Unlike Burr, he was not prepared to duel upon commencing negotiations. He was the unsuspecting recipient of a challenge, morally and theologically opposed to dueling yet profoundly protective of his honor and “religiously” committed to opposing Burr’s political career. Unsure how to proceed upon receiving Burr’s initial letter, he consulted with “a very moderate and judicious friend,” Rufus King, to discuss the propriety of Burr’s demand for an explanation. In the course of their conversation, Hamilton told King that he would accept a challenge if offered—but not necessarily fire at his challenger. King was stunned. A duelist was justified in preserving his life, he insisted; Hamilton would be shooting in self-defense. Nathaniel Pendleton, Hamilton’s second, made the same argument a few days later, finally eliciting a promise from Hamilton that “he would not decide lightly, but take time to deliberate fully.”¹⁵

On the evening of July 10, the night before the duel, Hamilton made his choice. In the midst of a final planning session, he told Pendleton that he had decided “not to fire at Col. Burr the first time, but to receive his fire, and fire in the air.” Pendleton vehemently protested, but Hamilton would not be swayed. His decision, he explained, was “the effect of a religious scruple, and does not admit of reasoning.” Pendleton did not understand. Neither had King. Aware that even his most intimate friends disapproved of his actions, about to risk his life for his reputation, Hamilton felt driven to explain himself.

Alone in his study after Pendleton's departure, he took up his pen.¹⁶

"On my expected interview with Col. Burr, I think it proper to make some remarks explanatory of my conduct, motives, and views," began Hamilton. He then set down his apologia, a four-page series of lawyerly assertions penned in an uncharacteristically constrained hand. The attorney Hamilton was defending his reputation before the tribunal of posterity, explaining his decision to duel.¹⁷

Hamilton first solicited his putative jury's sympathy by presenting himself as a law-abiding husband and father with many reasons to avoid a duel: it violated his religious and moral principles and defied the law, threatened the welfare of his family, put his creditors at risk, and ultimately compelled him to "hazard much, and . . . possibly gain nothing." Given these considerations, refusing Burr's challenge seemed the logical choice.

Yet the duel was "impossible . . . to avoid." There were "intrisick difficulties in the thing," because Hamilton had long made "extremely severe" attacks on Burr's political and private character. Because he uttered these remarks "with sincerity . . . and for purposes, which might appear to me commendable," he could not apologize. More complicating were the "artificial embarrassments" caused by Burr's insulting behavior throughout their negotiations. In his first letter to Hamilton, Burr had assumed "a tone unnecessarily peremptory and menacing" and in his second, "positively offensive." Such treatment almost compelled Hamilton to accept Burr's challenge, yet even in the face of such an affront, he had "wished, as far as might be practicable, to leave a door open to accommodation." He had struggled so diligently to avoid a confrontation that he was unsure whether he "did not go further in the attempt to accommodate, than a pun[c]-tilious delicacy will justify." If so, he hoped that his motives would deflect charges of cowardice.

Hamilton now approached the crux of his defense: his attempt to accommodate the mandates of honor and politics with those of morality, religion, and the law.¹⁸ He had satisfied the code of honor by accepting Burr's challenge, violating civil law only under duress. He had maintained his political integrity by refusing to apologize for sincere political convictions. Now he would uphold his moral and religious principles by withholding his fire. Because of "my general principles and temper in relation to similar affairs," Hamilton explained, "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." Hamilton's seemingly illogical plan thus comprised four reasoned decisions, each prompted by a separate code of conduct.

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Hamilton had ruled out many options, but one remained. Why not simply refuse to participate? Addressing himself to “those, who with me abhorring the practice of Duelling may think that I ought on no account to have added to the number of bad examples,” he explained his fundamental reason: “All the considerations which constitute what men of the world denominate honor, impressed on me (as I thought) a peculiar necessity not to decline the call. The ability to be in future useful, whether in resisting mischief or effecting good, in those crises of our public affairs, which seem likely to happen, would probably be inseparable from a conformity with public prejudice in this particular.” Like Burr, Hamilton fought the duel to preserve his position of leadership—his “ability to be in future useful” in political crises. Both men hoped to prove to the world, and to themselves, that they were men of their word, men of courage and principle: leaders.

Once Hamilton accepted Burr’s challenge, a duel was inevitable. The two seconds, Nathaniel Pendleton and William Van Ness, orchestrated the pending “interview,” setting a date, selecting a location, and devising rules. According to plan, on the morning of July 11, two rowboats crossed the Hudson River to Weehawken, New Jersey, Burr leaving first, Hamilton following later. When everyone had assembled on the dueling ground, the seconds measured off ten paces and cast lots for the choice of positions and to determine which second would give the command to fire; Hamilton won both tosses. Each second then loaded a pistol in sight of the other and handed it to his principal. Burr and Hamilton took their stations, facing one another. After asking if Burr and Hamilton were ready, Pendleton stated “present,” and the two guns fired, one after the other. Hamilton “almost instantly” fell. The stunned Burr advanced towards Hamilton with “a manner . . . expressive of regret,” but his second pulled him away to a waiting rowboat. Pendleton and attending physician David Hosack carried the fatally wounded Hamilton to a second rowboat shortly thereafter.¹⁹

As revealed in a long-overlooked account of Van Ness’s trial for his involvement in the duel, the participants took care to evade laws against dueling.²⁰ For example, the guns were hidden in a “portmanteau,” enabling the boatmen who rowed the participants to the dueling ground to testify that they “saw no pistols.” The boatmen and Hosack stood with their backs to the duelists, enabling them to testify that they “did not see the firing.” Hosack saw the two seconds and Hamilton disappear “into the wood” and “heard the report of 2 firearms soon after.” Hearing his name called, he rushed onto the dueling ground and “saw Genl. H . . . and supposed him wounded by

a ball through the body.” Having rowed across with Hamilton, the doctor could also testify that he had never seen Burr on the field; the seconds had arranged for Burr’s party to arrive first at the dueling ground for precisely this reason. The same logic compelled Van Ness to whisk Burr off the dueling ground before Hosack appeared. The doctor later testified that he “did not see Col. Burr” and did not learn “that Col. Burr was the other party” until after the duel.

A duel between two political “chiefs” would have attracted notice by this singularity alone. But when one chief killed another, there was heated controversy. The Burr-Hamilton duel was common knowledge hours after it transpired. Hamilton was rowed back to New York and carried to a friend’s house by 9:00 AM; by 10:00, “the rumour of the General’s injury had created an alarm in the city.” People stood on street corners discussing the affair. A bulletin was posted at the Tontine Coffee House informing the public that “General Hamilton was shot by Colonel Burr this morning in a duel. The General is said to be mortally wounded.”²¹ On the afternoon of July 12, after more than a day of excruciating pain, Hamilton died.

Although Pendleton and Van Ness attempted to prepare a joint newspaper statement, they could not “precisely agree” on which evidence to present or on the vital question of who fired first: Hamilton’s second claimed that his principal had involuntarily discharged his pistol in the air upon being shot, while Burr’s second insisted that Hamilton had taken aim and fired first. Ultimately, the two men published separate accounts of the duel, each favoring his principal.²² But Burr had too many enemies to survive the controversy unscathed. Seizing the opportunity, Federalist and Republican foes joined in high praise of Hamilton and condemnation of Burr as a murderer, raising enough public outrage to force Burr to flee the state. Brought up on charges in New York and New Jersey, he did not appear publicly in New York City for another eight years.²³ Thus, although he defeated his opponent on the field of honor, Burr was a failed duelist, for he was unable to sway public opinion in his favor.

As suggested by the motives and actions of both Burr and Hamilton, political duelists were not rapacious predators or suicidal fatalists deliberately masking their intentions under the guise of honor. They were men of public duty and private ambition who identified so closely with their public roles that they often could not distinguish between their identity as gentlemen and their status as political leaders. Longtime political opponents almost expected duels, for there was no way that constant opposition to a man’s political career could leave his personal identity unaffected. As Hamilton confessed on his deathbed, “I have found, for some time past, that my

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life must be exposed to that man.”²⁴ By opposing Burr’s political career, Hamilton was attacking his reputation, making himself perpetually vulnerable to a challenge. Nowhere do we witness this ambiguity more affectingly than in Hamilton’s apologia, his testament to the complexities of political leadership among men of honor.

JOANNE B. FREEMAN is professor of history at Yale University, specializing in the politics and political culture of the early American republic. She is the author of the award-winning *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) and editor of *Alexander Hamilton: Writings* (New York: Library of America, 2001). This essay is adapted from chapter four of *Affairs of Honor*.

NOTES

1. Charles Cooper to Philip Schuyler, [23 April 1804], in *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Harold C. Syrett et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961–87), 26:244. (Hereafter *Hamilton Papers*). For similar charges, see also Hamilton to John Rutledge, Jr., 4 January 1801; Hamilton to James Bayard, 6 April 1802; Hamilton, [Speech at a Meeting of Federalists in Albany], [10 February 1804], and Hamilton to Rufus King, 24 February 1804; *ibid.*, 25:293–98, 587–89, 26:187–90, 194–96.
2. James S. Biddle, ed., *Autobiography of Charles Biddle, Vice-President of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania, 1745–1821* (Philadelphia: E. Claxton, 1883), 305; New York *American Citizen*, January 6, 1804. See also Aaron Burr to Theodosia Burr Alston, 8 March 1802, Aaron Burr Papers, New-York Historical Society; Thomas Jefferson, [Memorandum of a conversation with Burr], 26 January [1804], in *Political Correspondence and Public Papers of Aaron Burr* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 2:820. (Hereafter *Burr Papers*). Cheetham, not Hamilton, wrote the pamphlets. Broadus Mitchell, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 2:526. Burr’s supporters blamed the duel on Cheetham’s newspaper diatribes. [William P. Van Ness], “A Correct Statement of the Late Melancholy Affair of Honor, Between General Hamilton and Col. Burr” (New York, 1804), 63–64.
3. Charles D. Cooper to Philip Schuyler, [23 April 1804], *Hamilton Papers*, 26:246; *Albany Register*, April 24, 1804. For the duel correspondence and proceedings, see William Coleman, *A Collection of the Facts and Documents, relative to the Death of Major-General Alexander Hamilton* (New York, 1804); Harold C. Syrett and Jean G. Cooke, *Interview in Weehawken: The Burr-Hamilton Duel as Told in the Original Documents* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1960); [Van Ness], “Correct Statement”; *Hamilton Papers*, 26:235–349. Also see Joanne B. Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 159–98; Freeman, “Duelling as Politics: Reinterpreting the Burr-Hamilton Duel,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 53 (April 1996):289–318; Mitchell, *Alexander Hamilton*, 2:527–38; W. J. Rorabaugh, “The Political Duel in the Early Republic: Burr v. Hamilton,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 15 (1995): 1–23.
4. *Hamilton Papers*, 26:240, head note; Jacob E. Cooke, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Scribner’s, 1982), 240–43; Milton Lomask, *Aaron Burr* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 1:344; Forrest McDonald, *Alexander Hamilton: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979), 360; Mitchell, *Alexander Hamilton*, 2:527, 542; *Burr Papers*, 2:881. On honor and dueling in America see Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the Nineteenth-Century American South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Dickson D. Bruce, *Violence and Culture in the Antebellum South* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979); Elliott J. Gorn, “‘Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch’: The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry,” *American Historical Review* 90 (1985):18–43; Steven M. Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Ritual in the Lives of the Planters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), and Wyatt-Brown, “Andrew Jackson’s Honor,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 17 (Spring 1997):1–36.
5. On early national political dueling, generally, and the Burr-Hamilton duel, specifically, see Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, chapter 4.
6. For details about these disputes, see Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, 326 note 13. During negotiations, Burr insisted that he had almost fought a duel with Hamilton twice before; Hamilton acknowledged only one time.
7. *The Balance*, January 5, 1802. See also Lewis Morgan to Robert R. Livingston, 15 May 1798, Robert R. Livingston Papers, New-York Historical Society.
8. On the importance of negotiations, see Stowe, *Intimacy and Power*, 30; Bruce, *Violence and Culture*, 32; and Kenneth S. Greenberg, “The Nose, the Lie, and the Duel in the Antebellum South,” *American Historical Review* 95 (1990):57–74, specifically 57, and Greenberg, *Honor and Slavery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), xii. On dueling rules and rituals, see Lorenzo Sabine, *Notes on Duels and Duelling, Alphabetically Arranged, with a Preliminary Historical Essay* (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, 1859); Andrew Steinmetz, *The Romance of Duelling in all Times and Countries*, 2 vols. (1868: Richmond England: Richmond, 1971 reprint); and John Lyde Wilson, *The Code of Honor; or Rules for the Government of Principals and Seconds in Duelling* (Charleston, 1838).

9. The relative infrequency of gunplay helps to explain Hamilton's behavior during his son Philip's 1801 honor dispute. Although he offered his son advice on dueling, he never expected an actual duel; by that time, he himself had been involved in eight affairs of honor without ever taking the field. When he discovered that Philip had left the city to duel, he fainted. David Hosack to John Church Hamilton, 1 January 1833, *Hamilton Papers*, 25:437, note 1.

10. New York *Morning Chronicle*, January 5, 1804.

11. The duel's political function was so widely recognized that anti-dueling tracts regularly suggested ending the practice by "withholding your suffrages from every man whose hands are stained with blood." Lyman Beecher, "The Remedy for Duelling. A Sermon" (New York, 1809), 4. See also Samuel Spring, "The Sixth Commandment Friendly to Virtue, Honor, and Politeness" (n.p., 1804), 24–25.

12. [Van Ness], "Correct Statement," 62–63.

13. For example, see Federalist charges against New York Republican Brockholst Livingston after he killed Federalist James Jones in a duel. Lewis Morgan to Robert R. Livingston, 15 May 1798, Robert R. Livingston Papers, New-York Historical Society; New York *Commercial Advertiser*, May 11 and 14, 1798.

14. Gore Vidal confesses that "the incest motif" was his "invention. I couldn't think of anything of a 'despicable nature' that would drive A[aron] B[urr] to so drastic an action." Gore Vidal, personal communication, in Arnold Rogow, *A Fatal Friendship: Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 240.

15. Hamilton to unknown recipient, 21 September 1792, *Hamilton Papers*, 12:408. Hamilton, [Statement on Impending Duel], [28 June – 10 July 1804], *ibid.*, 26:279; Charles King to Rufus King, 7 April 1819, and Rufus King to Matthew Clarkson, 24 August 1804, in *The Life and Correspondence of Rufus King*, ed. Charles R. King (New York: Putnam's, 1897), 4:396, 400–401; [Nathaniel Pendleton's Amendments to the Joint Statement Made by William P. Van Ness and Him on the Duel between Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr], [19 July 1804], *Hamilton Papers*, 26:338.

16. [Nathaniel Pendleton's Amendments to the Joint Statement Made by William P. Van Ness and Him on the Duel Between Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr], [19 July 1804], *Hamilton Papers*, 26:338. Internal evidence suggests that Hamilton wrote this statement on July 10, for it explains his decision to withhold his fire, a decision finalized with his second the night before the duel. Further evidence is contained within Hamilton's July 10 letter to his wife, explaining that he would withhold his fire owing to "the Scruples of a Christian," words that echo both his July 10 remarks to his second and the introductory passage of his apologia. [Nathaniel Pendleton's Amendments], [19 July 1804] and Hamilton to Elizabeth Hamilton, [10 July 1804], *ibid.*, 26:337–39, 308; Charles King to Rufus King, 7 April 1819, and Rufus King to Matthew Clarkson, 24 August 1804, in *Correspondence of Rufus King*, 4:396, 400–401. Burr seems to have dated Hamilton's statement July 10 as well; Aaron Burr to Charles Biddle, 18 July 1804, *Burr Papers*, 2:887–88.

17. Hamilton, [Statement on Impending Duel with Aaron Burr], *Hamilton Papers*, 26:278. All quotations in the next four paragraphs are from this statement. Hamilton's

apologia is extreme but not unique. Burr wrote a (somewhat utilitarian) parting statement the night before the duel, as had Hamilton before his anticipated duel with James Nicholson nine years earlier. The three statements reveal shared concerns—debts, family, friends—but also display differences in tone and content, a reminder of the importance of considerations of temperament, self-conception, and circumstance to an understanding of dueling. Aaron Burr to Joseph Alston, 10 July 1804, in Matthew L. Davis, *Memoirs of Aaron Burr* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1837), 2:234–26; Alexander Hamilton to Robert Troup, 25 July 1795, *Hamilton Papers*, 26:503–7.

18. On incompatible value systems, see Douglass Adair and Marvin Harvey, "Was Alexander Hamilton a Christian Statesman?" *William and Mary Quarterly* (1955): 308–29; Steinmetz, *Romance of Duelling*, 1:5–6; and Gerald Stourzh, *Alexander Hamilton and the Idea of Republican Government* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1970), 94.

19. This account is taken from [Joint Statement by William P. Van Ness and Nathaniel Pendleton on the Duel between Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr], [17 July 1804], *Hamilton Papers*, 26:333–36. Hamilton provided the set of pistols, which he borrowed from his brother-in-law, John Barker Church. The pistols were irregular in a number of ways, most notably because they had a hidden hair trigger that the owner could deploy to his advantage without the other party's knowledge. Although this has led some people to accuse Hamilton of cheating, in fact, the presence of the hair trigger was no secret, as suggested by Pendleton's newspaper discussion of it. [Nathaniel Pendleton's Amendments], [19 July 1804], *Hamilton Papers*, 26:338.

20. William P. Van Ness vs. the People, [January 1805], Duel papers, William P. Van Ness Papers, New-York Historical Society. This detailed transcript of Van Ness's trial contains invaluable eyewitness accounts of the duel. Quotes in this account are from this transcript. See also *Hamilton Papers*, 26:334 note 5.

21. J. M. Mason to William Coleman, 18 July 1804, in Coleman, *Collection*, 51. The account in this paragraph is taken from James Parton, *The Life and Times of Aaron Burr* (New York, 1864), 356–57.

22. See [Joint Statement by William P. Van Ness and Nathaniel Pendleton], 17 July 1804; [Pendleton's Amendments], [19 July 1804]; [William P. Van Ness's Amendments], [21 July 1804], *Hamilton Papers*, 26:333–36, 337–39, 340–41. Also see correspondence between Van Ness and Pendleton between July 11 and 16, 1804, *ibid.*, 26:311–12, 329–32. In a public statement, attending physician Hosack noted that Hamilton, after regaining consciousness, did not remember discharging his pistol. David Hosack to William Coleman, 17 August 1804, *ibid.*, 26:345 (first published in Coleman's *Collection*, 18–21).

23. Burr was charged with murder in New Jersey (although dueling was legal in New Jersey and Hamilton died in New York) and with violating anti-dueling laws in New York.

24. J. M. Mason to William Coleman, 18 July 1804, in Coleman, *Collection*, 53. See also James Nicholson to Albert Gallatin, 6 May 1800, Albert Gallatin Papers, New-York Historical Society.