

The duel: Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr

Introduction

Alexander Hamilton, former secretary of the treasury, and Aaron Burr, sitting vice president of the United States, had feuded publicly for years. Their long-standing enmity came to a head in the spring of 1804. After an exchange of letters and meetings between intermediaries, the duel was set for July 11, 1804. Within hours of the duel, Angelica Schuyler Church, Elizabeth Hamilton's sister and Hamilton's close friend and correspondent, wrote this letter to her brother Philip Schuyler to break the news. She wrote that the Hamilton "was this morning woun[d]ed by that wretch Burr." Her handwriting suggests her level of distress. Angelica also wrote, "we have every reason to hope that he will recover," but he did not. Hamilton died the following morning, surrounded by family and friends, after a night of agony.

Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and transcript and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer these questions.

1. Research the issue(s) that led to the tragic duel. Which of the disagreements contributed most to the events leading up to the duel?
2. Under what circumstances, referred to as "affairs of honor," would gentlemen consider dueling?
3. Rumors abounded that Hamilton aimed high and off the mark and Burr aimed to kill. How would this affect later views of the participants?

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Image

St. W. Raphael Genesee
 Wednesday Morn

My dear Brother

I have the painful task to inform
 you that General Hamilton was this
 morning wounded by that Wretch Burr
 but we have every reason to hope that
 he will recover. My Advice that you
 advise immediately to my father, as perhaps
 he may wish to come down - My dear Sister
 bear with Spartanlike fortitude this affliction;
 The Town is in consternation, and there
 exists only the expression of grief & Indignation
 Adieu My dear Brother remember me
 to all, ever Yours
 A. M. C.

Angelica Schuyler Church to Philip Schuyler, July 11, 1804. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC07882)

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Transcript

Angelica Schuyler Church to Philip Schuyler, July 11, 1804. (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC07882)

at M^f. Bayards Grenwich

Wednesday Morn

My dear Brother

I have the painful task to inform you that General Hamilton was this morning wounded by that wretch Burr but we have every reason to hope that he will recover. May I advise that you repair immediately to my father, as perhaps he may wish to come down – My dear Sister bears with saintlike fortitude this affliction;

The Town is in consternation, and there exists only the expression of Grief & Indignation.

Adieu my dear Brother remember me to Sally, ever yours

A Church

[address leaf]

12 E

Philip J. Schuyler Esq

near Rhynebeck

Dutchess County

Post Master to send by Express immediately

[docket]

Angelica Church

July 11. 1804