

Sex and Public Memory of Founder Aaron Burr



Aaron Burr is best known as the man who shot and killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel. Few Americans could tell you much more about him. He does not grace memorials or money, and has not been remembered well. His detractors would have told you that this was justice served for an American “monster,” in Gore Vidal’s words. His critics accused him of trying to steal the presidential election of 1800 from Thomas Jefferson—a charge that would only deepen in its negative resonance as Jefferson’s historical stature rose. Public response to the death of Hamilton in 1804 added to his villainous image. By 1807, when he was tried for treason, his legacy’s fate was sealed.


Historian Nancy Isenberg has analyzed the sexualized politics of the early Republic that gave rise to Burr’s reputation as an immoral, sexually dissipated man. As Isenberg explains, Burr became the target of sexually charged attacks in the press for fifteen years beginning with his becoming a U.S. senator for New York in 1792. This depiction of him as sexually corrupt in his private life contrasted sharply with his early pedigree and public accomplishments. The grandson of famed New England minister Jonathan Edwards, Burr was born in 1756

in Newark, New Jersey. He attended Princeton at the age of thirteen, eventually becoming a successful lawyer. He served as a U.S. senator, as the third vice president of the United States, and as a major figure in the development of the political party system in the new nation. In 1800 Aaron Burr stood a "hair's breadth" away from becoming the third president of the United States, losing to Thomas Jefferson by just one electoral vote. He married widow Theodosia Prevost in 1782. Together they had one child, Theodosia. Both his wife and daughter perished tragically and prematurely: His wife died from cancer in 1794, and his daughter was lost at sea in the winter of 1812. Her son (Burr's only grandchild) had died at the age of ten that same year. In 1833, after almost four decades of being a widower, he married widow Eliza Jumel, separating just four months later. He lived until 1836, dying at the age of 80—on the very day that their divorce was finalized.

Public memory of Aaron Burr contains fascinating threads that defend his reputation by asserting that his inner self conformed to normative, idealized standards, and thus that he could not have been guilty of the charges of immorality that were leveled against him. There has never been a shortage of negative depictions of Burr, but it has become a nearly two-centuries-old cliché that he "has always been out of favor," that he has only enjoyed the reputation of "outright villain" among the founders. By tracing defenses of his personal life from the nineteenth century to the recent past, this essay shows that sex has long been used to define the character of the American founders; arguably it continues to be used in this capacity as a window to the nation's soul.

Two Burrs, Burr the traitor and Burr the rake, were often co-conspirators. In the preface to an 1847 novel titled *Burton: Or, the Sieges*, the incredibly prolific popular novelist Joseph Holt Ingraham illustrated how negative depictions of Burr explicitly connected his private character and his political person: "In the page of history from which this romance is taken, we see the young aid-de-camp exhibiting the trophies of his conquests, drawn from the wreck of innocence and beauty. If we turn to a later page, we shall see the betrayer of female confidence, by a natural and easy transition, become the betrayer of the trust reposed in him by his country, and ready to sacrifice her dearest interests on the altar of youthful vanity, ripened into hoary ambition."

His earliest biographer, Matthew L. Davis, stated that he had possession of virtually all of Burr's letters and met and discussed with him (at Burr's request) as he worked on his memoirs. Burr's letters, according to Davis, indicated "no very strict morality in some of his female correspondents." Acting with the chivalry that his subject supposedly lacked, Davis separated out and destroyed such letters to protect the reputations and virtue, not of Burr, but of the young women and their families. He claimed that Burr wouldn't let the letters be destroyed in his lifetime, but when Burr died Davis burned them all so that no one else could publish them. In the absence of such sources, biographers have largely had only the accusations to work with.

 "Portrait of Aaron Burr," engraved by J.A. O'Neill, after portrait by John Vanderlyn (1802). Courtesy of the Portrait Prints Collection, the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Davis was criticized by numerous biographers for largely depicting Burr as his political enemies had done. Burr's second biographer, James Parton, set the tone for future defensive accounts. Parton, who would found *American Heritage*, was the most popular biographer of nineteenth-century America. He complained: "Mr. Matthew L. Davis, to whom Colonel Burr left his papers and correspondence, and the care of his fame, prefaces his work with a statement that has, for twenty years, closed the ears of his countrymen against every word that may have been uttered in Burr's praise or vindication."

Parton's mid-nineteenth-century account defended Burr from a host of negative depictions, beginning with those that centered on his youth and reputation as a college lothario. "It has been said ... that he was dissipated at college; but his dissipation could scarcely have been of an immoral nature." Burr, he explained, was not given to immoral activities that typically link to sexuality, including gambling, drinking, and general excess.

One such rumor was that during the Revolution, he seduced and abandoned a young woman named Margaret Moncrieffe. Parton's biography dismissed the story, and additionally cast aspersions on her character. Parton described Moncrieffe as a girl of fourteen, "but a woman in development and appetite, witty, vivacious, piquant and beautiful." He attempted to discredit her by portraying her as immoral, stating the account had been "published after she had been the mistress of half a dozen of the notables of London." And he lamented Burr's legacy: "the man has enough to answer for without having the ruin of this girl of fourteen laid to his charge."

Later defenders would echo Parton's response. An 1899 biography of Burr by Henry Childs Merwin explained: "It is evident that, whatever may have been Burr's conduct toward Margaret Moncrieffe, the lady herself, the person chiefly concerned, had no complaint to make of it." And Merwin yoked Burr's sexual reputation to broader character traits. "Burr was all his life an excessively busy, hard-working man; he was abstemious as respects food and drink; he was refined and fastidious in all his tastes; he preserved his constitution almost unimpaired to a great age. It is nearly incredible that such a man could have been the unmitigated profligate described by Mr. Davis."

Burr's defenders also trained their sights on his marriage. Similar to popular depictions of Hamilton, Washington, and Jefferson, in the hands of his biographers Burr appears to have experienced the perfect marital union. (And similar to the cases of Hamilton, Washington, and Jefferson, we have little to no documentation to support the characterization of this very personal relationship.) Virtually all of his defenders emphasize the idealized romantic

bond that he shared with his wife. Parton insisted: "To the last, she was a happy wife, and he an attentive, fond husband. I assert this positively. The contrary has been recently declared on many platforms; but I pronounce the assertion to be one of the thousand calumnies with which the memory of his singular, amiable, and faulty being has been assailed. ... I repeat, therefore, that Mrs. Burr lived and died a satisfied, a confiding, a beloved, a trusted wife."

Parton made it clear that Burr could have won the hand of any young "maiden" he desired. But that he "should have chosen to marry a widow ten years older than himself, with two rollicking boys (one of them eleven years old), with precarious health, and no great estate," revealed much about his character. And, indeed, for Parton the marriage countered much that had been written about Burr. "Upon the theory that Burr was the artful devil he has been said to be, all whose ends and aims were his own advancement, no man can explain such a marriage."

Parton emphasized that Burr was not guilty of marrying for money: "Before the Revolution he had refused, point-blank, to address a young lady of fortune, whom his uncle, Thaddeus Burr, incessantly urged upon his attention." And he could have married others for personal gain: "During the Revolution he was on terms of intimacy with all the great families of the State—the Clintons, the Livingstons, the Schuylers, the Van Rensselaers, and the rest; alliance with either of whom gave a young man of only average abilities, immense advantages in a State which was, to a singular extent, under the dominion of great families."

No, it would be made clear that Burr married not for power but instead for love. Parton explained, "no considerations of this kind could break the spell which drew him, with mysterious power, to the cottage at remote and rural Paramus," where his future wife lived.

Parton wrote in a decade that saw the emergence of a dedicated women's rights movement, and he portrayed Burr as an early feminist, a view that would later be more fully developed: "He thought highly of the minds of women; he prized their writings. The rational part of the opinions now advocated by the Woman's Rights Conventions, were his opinions fifty years before those Conventions began their useful and needed work," Parton claimed. (At the time of the publication of his biography of Burr, James Parton was married to Sara Payson Willis, who had gained fame under her pseudonym Fanny Fern as the author of the proto-feminist novel *Ruth Hall*.) Parton's depiction of Burr's wife as friend supported the claim that Burr had a deep respect for women. "The lady was *not* beautiful. Besides being past her prime, she was slightly disfigured by a scar on her forehead. It was the graceful and winning manners of Mrs. Prevost that first captivated the mind of Colonel Burr."

Burr's defenders have long recognized the need to defend his personal life as part of the defense of his political life. Virtually all have recognized the

significant role that his personal reputation played in his public standing. Parton insisted: "Burr never compromised a woman's name, nor spoke lightly of a woman's virtue, nor boasted of, nor *mentioned* any favors he may have received from a woman." Indeed, he exclaimed, "*he was the man least* capable of such unutterable meanness!" Although Burr has remained a lesser known founder, and one with a tarnished reputation, his ample supply of defenders have long followed Parton's well-constructed foundation, one that relied on yoking positive portrayals of his sexuality in an effort to shore up his battered political self.

Many of his early twentieth-century biographers decried the fact that his personal life overshadowed his public accomplishments, and they continued to highlight his intimate life as one of virtue. The alleged falsity of the tale of the seduction and abandonment of Margaret Moncrieffe and additionally the supposed lies behind a story of the intentional "ruin" of one Miss Bullock were repeatedly used to defend his character. A 1925 biography by Samuel Wandell and Meade Mingerode prematurely stated that the legend about Bullock had been "finally laid to rest" by the reference librarian at Princeton, who had "showed conclusively, from evidence furnished by the unfortunate lady's family" that she had died "quite virtuously." Nathan Schachner wrote in his biography of Burr, a decade later, that: "Another legend is not so innocuous. It was the forerunner of a whole battalion of similar tales, all purporting to prove Aaron Burr a rake, a seducer, a scoundrel, a man without morals and without principles, wholly unfit to be invited into any decent man's home. Though, on analysis, not one of these infamous stories has emerged intact." He then described the "canard" of Burr seducing and abandoning a "young lady of Princeton" who later in "despair committed suicide." The author explained that the girl died of "tubercular condition" twenty years after Burr graduated from Princeton.

Some accounts defended Burr as having exposed Moncrieffe as a spy for the British. A 1903 historical novel—*Blennerhasset*, by Charles Felton Pidgin—depicted the Moncrieffe story as a later burden for Burr, despite the fact that he was in fact a great patriot. In this regard, rumors about Burr's sexual history were criticized for overshadowing the truth of his virtue and for hiding what was his true patriotism. Explained the character of Burr in the novel: "'I became convinced that she was conveying intelligence to the enemy and I wrote a letter to General Washington informing him of my suspicions. By his orders, she was at once sent out of the city. The chain of circumstances was followed up and it was discovered that the mayor of the city, who was a Tory, and Governor Tryon, the British commander, who made his headquarters on board the Duchess of Gordon, a British man-of-war lying below here in the river, were implicated in the plot.'" The man he explained this to asked: "'And were you publicly thanked by the commander-in-chief?'" "'Not by name,' said Burr, somewhat abruptly, and he thought of the manner in which his name had been coupled with that of the young lady in question." Here Burr was portrayed as the victim of his own patriotism. For this author, dismissing the Moncrieffe story not only cleared Burr's name—it made it possible to depict the true Aaron

Burr, a patriot and war hero.

Another early twentieth-century account, by Alfred Henry Lewis, romanticized the incident, notably including only vague reference to the young woman's age: "On that day when the farmers of Concord turn their rifles upon King George, there dwells in Elizabeth a certain English Major Moncrieffe. With him is his daughter, just ceasing to be a girl and beginning to be a woman. Peggy Moncrieffe is a beauty, and, to tell a whole truth, confident thereof to the verge of brazen... . Young Aaron, selfish, gallant, pleased with a pretty face as with a poem, becomes flatteringly attentive to pretty Peggy Moncrieffe. She, for her side, turns restless when he leaves her, to glow like the sun when he returns. She forgets the spinning wheel for his conversation. The two walk under the trees in the Battery, or, from the quiet steps of St. Paul's, watch the evening sun go down beyond the Jersey hills." This account styled Moncrieffe as hardly a victim, but rather as "brazen," welcoming the advances of the dashing young soldier. The defense of Burr in the case of Moncrieffe would continue through the twentieth century. A mid-century account by Herbert Parmet and Marie Hecht dismissed the story directly, stating that the "lady's own words contradict this assumption" and calling it a "very good example of the propensity of his chroniclers to link Burr's name with women, particularly notorious ones." Milton Lomask's two-volume biography included the story of Miss Bullock as a "typical example of the many half-factual, half-fanciful tales that have attached themselves to the memory of Aaron Burr." It continued by explaining that, "fed by Burr's then growing reputation as a ladies' man, this macabre tale persisted in the face of evidence, unearthed by a Princeton librarian, that Miss Bullock had died in the home of an aunt, 'quite virtuously,' of tuberculosis."



"President's Row, Princeton Cemetery," with Aaron Burr's name on tombstone in foreground. Detroit Publishing Company (c. 1903). Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

In a similarly defensive move, Burr's marriage was idealized by his twentieth-century biographers, as it had been by Parton a century earlier. Henry Childs Merwin wrote in his 1899 biography of Burr that "his family life was ideal," and Charles Burr Todd, writing three years later, stated: "I think it should be mentioned here—because the opposite has been stated—that the marriage was conducive of great happiness to both, and that Colonel Burr was to the end the most faithful and devoted of husbands." Quoting a lengthy passage in the *Leader*, it continued, and included the following: "His married life with Mrs. Prevost ... was of the most affectionate character, and his fidelity never questioned." Virtually all of the accounts read in a similar manner. Consider, for example, the following: "This marriage certainly gives no color to the popular belief that Colonel Burr was a cold, selfish, unprincipled schemer, with an eye always open to the main chance." Similarly, Wandell and Minngerode

defended Burr's marriage thusly: "It was a love marriage, that of Aaron Burr and Theodosia Prevost," and "admirable in the last degree."

The depiction of his marriage as spotless provides a powerful counterweight to the blemishes that mar both his public and private reputations. Biographers implicitly and explicitly use the bond of husband and wife to discredit those who challenge his personal character in the area of romantic relations. One 1930s author noted: "Between Burr and his wife ardent love had deepened to an abiding trust." This depiction only deepened in the twentieth century. In the early 1970s, Laurence Kunstler described the marriage as "twelve wonderful, happy, and triumphant years," and Jonathan Daniels lauded the union as "a faithful love which only the most austere historians and venomous critics have questioned." Samuel Engel Burr Jr.—the founder of the Aaron Burr Association, a professor of American studies, and a sixth-generation descendant of Burr—wrote several books in the 1960s and 1970s defending his ancestor's reputation, and all bolstered his character by defending his marriage. In *Colonel Aaron Burr*, Burr depicted it as a "happy experience for both of them." And in a Mother's Day lecture delivered to the New York Schoolmasters' Club, he focused on the "influence of [Burr's] wife and his daughter" on his "life and career" to underscore his domestic bond, in contrast to the view of him as a vile seducer of women. (Burr Jr. also argues that Madame Jumel divorced Aaron on trumped up charges of adultery, arguing it was the "only legal grounds for divorce" at the time, thus trying to further wipe the slate clean.) Virtually all authors agree with Jonathan Daniels, who argued that "Nothing is more clear in the record than Burr's tenderness and concern for his wife." Still others, including Milton Lomask, contended: "To trace Aaron Burr's life as a husband and father ... is to glimpse the man at his best. Domesticity became him."

Of particular importance to Burr's defenders was his choice of spouse. Virtually all biographers insert that Mrs. Prevost was no "beauty," underscoring that there was no superficial attraction that drew Burr to her. In a typical example, Nathan Schachner described her as "not beautiful," "pious," "well read and cultured." This view continued through the twentieth century. Burr could have married "into any of those powerful prosperous dynasties," wrote Laurence Kunstler, emphasizing that he had instead married for love. Charles Burr Todd (a descendant of the Burr family) made a similar point in his 1902 biography: "He was young, handsome, well born, a rising man in his profession, and might no doubt have formed an alliance with any one of the wealthy and powerful families that lent lustre to the annals of their State. This would have been the course of a politician. But Burr, disdaining these advantages, married the widow of a British officer, the most unpopular thing in the then state of public feeling that a man could do, a lady without wealth, position, or beauty, and at least ten years his senior, simply because he loved her; and he loved her, it is well to note, because she had the truest heart, the ripest intellect, and the most winning and graceful manners of any woman he had ever met." Late in life, Aaron Burr would marry a second time. But as if to underscore the significance of his first marital bond, no biographers dwell on this bond or the marriage.

Virtually all twentieth-century accounts point out that in contrast to the politicized depiction of Aaron Burr as a man who seduced and abandoned women, Burr "showed an understanding of women." Such authors typically concede that Burr had numerous affairs with women, but that they were not exploitive. As Jonathan Daniels wrote, perhaps over-descriptively: "There was never anything in his life, however, to suggest the bestiality and brutality in sex which his enemies imputed to him. Concupiscent, he may have been, cruel he never was."

Burr's most recent biographer, Nancy Isenberg, the only academic historian to take on that task, highlights his support for early feminism as evidenced by the fact that his marriage was "based on a very modern idea of friendship between the sexes." Calling Burr a "feminist," she argues that he was alone among the Founding Fathers in this regard: "No other founder even came close to thinking in these terms."

Today, much as in his own lifetime, the debate rages about the salience of his personal life for understanding the "true" Burr. Some contend that the "true biography" of Burr "must be disentangled" "from ... a mass of legend about his lapses with the ladies." Others revel in those stories as a way to bring to life the Burr they think existed. The view of Burr as unique—for better or worse—is an old one. James Parton, writing in direct response to the early account of Matthew Davis, set the tone for a defense of Burr's personal life that would last until the present day. Parton could not have been more assertive:

Aaron Burr, then, was a man of gallantry. He was not a debauchee; not a corrupter of virgin innocence; not a de-spoiler of honest households; not a betrayer of tender confidences. He was a man of gallantry. It is beyond question that, in the course of his long life, he had many intrigues with women, some of which (not many, there is good reason to believe) were carried to the point of criminality. The grosser forms of licentiousness he utterly abhorred; such as the seduction of innocence, the keeping of mistresses, the wallowing in the worse than beastliness of prostitution.

This kind of defense continued through the end of the nineteenth century, with biographers outlining their case against his detractors and making a strong case for examining the public and private life of a man who clearly had intimate relationships outside the context of marriage and who raised questions in many minds about his allegiance to the nation.

Twentieth-century biographers wrote of Burr as a victim on many scores: of politics in the early republic, of a back-stabbing first biographer, and of later portrayals, as "one of history's greatest losers," as Donald Barr Chidsey put it. The novel *Blennerhassett* began with a similar note of Burr's exceptional status: "For a hundred years, one of the most remarkable of Americans has borne a weight of obloquy and calumny such as has been heaped upon no other man, and, unlike any other man, during his lifetime he never by voice or pen made answer to charges made against him, or presented either to

friends or foes any argument or evidence to refute them.” Nathan Schachner, writing in the 1930s, similarly captured the view of many biographers who have chronicled Burr. He wrote: “Probably of no one else in American history are there more unsupported, and unsupportable, tales in circulation.” And he ended his biography with a similar refrain: “Who in history has survived a more venomous brood of decriers?”

Burr’s legacy dramatically illustrates the various ways that sexual reputation informs public masculine character. Despite the complaints of his biographers who positioned themselves as solitary champions of history’s greatest victim, a man repeatedly “misinterpreted” and “misjudged,” there has never been a shortage of Burr defenders, then or now, and virtually all of them use sex as one means of shoring up his public standing. Our enduring interest in connecting personal with public selves will almost certainly keep competing Burrs alive in popular memory—and will no doubt prevent Aaron Burr from ever being either completely “rescued” or finally banished from the pantheon of great American founders.

Further Reading

This essay comes out of my research for my most recent book, [*Sex and the Founding Fathers: The American Quest for a Relatable Past*](#) (Philadelphia, 2014), which examines the ways in which we have (or haven’t) talked about the sex lives of the founders. The current depiction of Burr as sexually and morally bankrupt was perhaps most popularly captured by the 1973 historical novel *Burr* by Gore Vidal, in which Burr is gossiped to be the “lover of his own daughter”—a fictionalized rumor created by Vidal. Burr has been the subject of more straightforward biographies since shortly after his death. The earliest is Matthew L. Davis, *Memoirs of Aaron Burr with Miscellaneous Selections from his Correspondence* (New York, 1836), while the most enthusiastically pro-Burr may be James Parton, *Life and Times of Aaron Burr* (New York, 1858). There have been numerous biographies since, including Herbert S. Parmet and Marie B. Hecht, *Aaron Burr: Portrait of an Ambitious Man* (New York, 1967); Donald Barr Chidsey, *The Great Conspirator: Aaron Burr and His Strange Doings in the West* (New York, 1967); Jonathan Daniels, *Ordeal of Ambition: Jefferson, Hamilton, Burr* (New York, 1970), Laurence Kunstler, *The Unpredictable Mr. Aaron Burr* (New York, 1974); Milton Lomask’s two-volume *Aaron Burr* (New York, 1979-82). The best modern biography is by Nancy Isenberg, *Fallen Founder: The Life of Aaron Burr* (New York, 2007). Her essay “The ‘Little Emperor’: Aaron Burr, Dandyism, and the Sexual Politics of Treason,” in Jeffrey L. Pasley, Andrew W. Robertson, and David Waldstreicher, eds., *Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2004) is also extremely valuable.

Burr is notable among the founders for the extent to which his descendants have taken up his cause. Charles Burr Todd, a historian of the Burr family from Connecticut, wrote *The True Aaron Burr: A Biographical Sketch*, in 1902 (New

York). Samuel Engle Burr Jr. not only founded the Aaron Burr Association; he also wrote books loyal to his ancestor's memory, including *Colonel Aaron Burr: The American Phoenix* (New York, 1961) and *The Influence of his Wife and his Daughter on the Life and Career of Col. Aaron Burr* (Linden, Va., 1975).

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