

During the course of the 1804 election season Hamilton had regularly and flagrantly vilified Burr in speeches, some of which were attended by Burr's agents who reported back on their contents. Hamilton covered much the same ground repeatedly: that Burr was an unprincipled schemer, and would, if given the opportunity and power, tear the nation apart. One of Hamilton's talks in particular, given at a private dinner, was attended by a Burr supporter whose synopsis made its way into print. Burr took particular notice of the writer's inflammatory claim that Hamilton had expressed certain "despicable" opinions of him, and that the writer "could detail . . . a still more despicable opinion" that Hamilton had uttered.

Burr, who at the time of the disclosure had been defeated by Hamilton's candidate in the gubernatorial election, wrote an ominous letter to Hamilton demanding an explanation of the "still more despicable opinion." Hamilton was evasive in his reply: ". . . that I have expressed some other still more despicable; without however mentioning to whom, when or where . . . admits of infinite shades . . ." The letters flew back and forth. Soon, "seconds" took over messenger duties--preliminary steps in the code duello to an eventual interview. Hamilton parried to Burr's thrusts; while Burr demanded an admission that the thing had been said,

Hamilton continually pointed to the vagueness of the reporter's assertions, and indignantly objected to Burr's hostile approach. Neither Hamilton nor Burr revealed the nature of the "more despicable opinion;" but both apparently knew to what it referred; and it seems that they will be the only ones who will ever know for sure despite some interesting guesses by historians. Or perhaps neither knew what it was. Hamilton had already covered the spectrum of despicable in his anti-Burr harangues of the past four years, and Burr had found no reason to challenge him. Could the "more despicable opinion" have been the invention of a particularly clever and cruel baiter for whom Burr and Hamilton, both at that point unstable, operating at the very edge of severely frayed nerves, made an easy catch?

Ultimately, Hamilton acquiesced to Burr's demands for satisfaction. It was impossible for him to avoid the duel, he wrote in a summary statement, because "it is not to be denied, that my animadversions on the political principles character and views of Col Burr have been extremely severe . . ." Hamilton added, however, that his statements were not made on 'light grounds, or from unworthy inducements.' Some of the things he said, admitted Hamilton, might have contained misinformation, but 'It is also my ardent wish that I may have been more mistaken than I think I have been, and that [Burr] by his future conduct may shew himself worthy of all confidence and esteem, and prove an ornament and blessing to his Country.'

One can imagine that a grim smile flickered across Hamilton's face as he wrote those last words. Hamilton busily went about getting his affairs into order, preparing a concise statement on his financial situation, making apologies for his debts while taking solace in the fact that 'in all the pecuniary concerns the delicacy, no less than the probity of my conduct in public stations, has been such as to defy even the shadow of a question.'

To Elizabeth, he wrote: 'If it had been possible for me to have avoided the interview, my love for you and my precious children would have been alone a decisive motive. But it was not possible, without sacrifices which would have rendered me unworthy of your esteem. Adieu best of wives and best of Women.' What comfort Elizabeth Hamilton might have derived from that statement must have been cold indeed.

Burr received satisfaction at Weehawken on July 11, 1804, when he mortally wounded Hamilton on the first shot. Still alive, but paralyzed from the waist down, Hamilton was brought to the home of a friend where he slowly died from internal bleeding. He breathed his last at two o'clock in the afternoon on July 12.

Alexander Hamilton left behind him Elizabeth, their seven children, and a mountain of debts. After all the accusations that he had taken advantage of his own policies for personal profit, Hamilton was close to broke when he died. For propriety's sake, he refused to enrich himself; for propriety's sake, he refused to accept the army pension to which he was unquestionably entitled; for propriety's sake, he regularly undercharged his legal clients. When he could have amassed a fortune he resolved not to, preferring instead to leave a blameless public record:

"Because there must be some public fools who sacrifice private to public interest at the certainty of ingratitude and obloquy--because my vanity whispers I ought to be one of those fools and ought to keep myself in a situation the best calculated to render service--because I don't want to be rich and if I cannot live in splendor in Town . . . I can at least live in comfort in the country and I am content to do so."

Had contentedness been possible for Hamilton, he probably would have found it in retirement at the Grange surrounded by his family. Ever restless, ever disappointed, he grasped onto the most available means to secure his honor, and find a respite from his struggle.