

The Duel that Never Was:
James Monroe, Alexander Hamilton, and (wait for it . . .) Aaron Burr

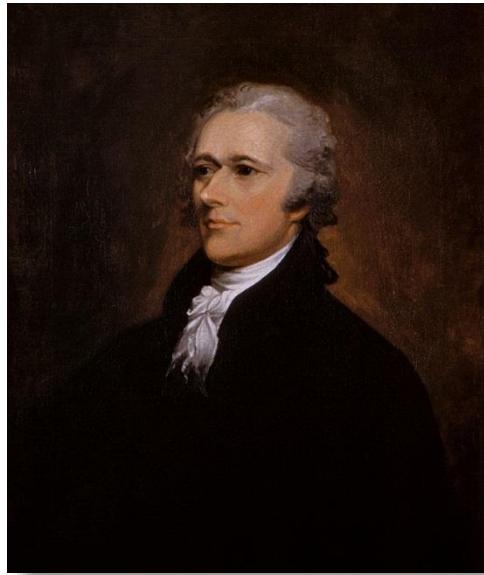
by Scott Harris



James Monroe

August 1797 was a trying month for James Monroe. One year earlier, he had been recalled as United States minister to France after a tumultuous tenure, during which his desire to strengthen ties between the two countries had collided with the efforts of George Washington's administration to improve relations with Great Britain. Monroe's public embarrassment was but one of the incidents of increasing political conflict between the emerging Federalist and Democratic-Republican parties. As a leading figure in the latter faction, Monroe added fuel to the fire by preparing a pamphlet defending his French mission and engaging in an acrimonious correspondence with Secretary of State Timothy Pickering, among others.

During the hot August days in Philadelphia, Monroe's pen scratched out more than defense of his conduct as an ambassador. He was also engaged in a series of letters with two men well known to him, and to each other—Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr. While politics figured heavily in this correspondence, so, too, did sexual misconduct, personal honor, and the prospect of death.



Alexander Hamilton

It all began five years earlier, in December 1792. Monroe, then a United States senator from Virginia, arrived at Hamilton's New York City home, accompanied by two members of Congress: Rep. Frederick Muhlenberg of Pennsylvania and Rep. Abraham B. Venable of Virginia. Their purpose was to confront Hamilton, then secretary of the treasury in Washington's administration, with letters alleging his official misconduct. They believed that Hamilton was guilty of conspiring with two men, James Reynolds and Jacob Clingman, in a financial scam. Hamilton shocked the delegation by revealing that his suspicious payments to Reynolds were the result of blackmail stemming from Hamilton's extramarital affair with Reynolds' wife Maria. Faced with Hamilton's detailed description of his dalliance with Maria Reynolds, and letters corroborating the affair that he allowed them to copy, Monroe, Muhlenberg, and Venable excused themselves with apologies and pledged to keep the entire matter private.

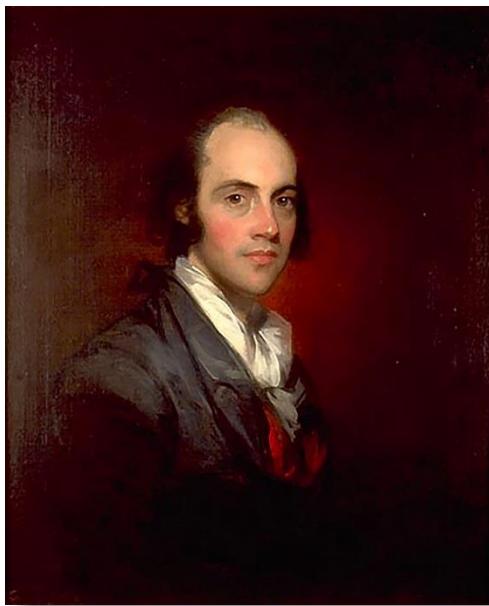
In the summer of 1797, journalist James T. Callender published a collection of pamphlets entitled *The History of the United States for 1796*, in which he promised to uncover public wrongdoing on Hamilton's part. Callender had access to the letters provided by Hamilton to Monroe's delegation, though it is unclear how the newsman obtained them. Most historians believe that congressional clerk John Beckley, fired from his post by the Federalists, provided the letters to Callender to aid Thomas Jefferson and the Republicans. In letters dated July 5 and July 8, Hamilton asked for a public statement of his innocence of malfeasance by Monroe. Since he had developed doubts about Hamilton's truthfulness, and was also stung by attacks from the Federalists, Monroe was reluctant to comply with Hamilton's request.

At a heated meeting between Hamilton and Monroe in the latter's New York lodgings on July 11, Monroe denied leaking the documents. Hamilton refused to believe him, whereupon:

... the Gentlemen both instantly rose Col. M. rising first and saying do you say I represented falsely, you are a Scoundrel—Col. H. said I will meet you like a Gentleman. Col. M. Said I am ready get your pistols . . .¹

Two other men present, David Gelston and John Barker Church, interceded and helped convince the antagonists “that any warmth or unguarded expressions that had happened during the interview should be buried and considered as tho’ it had never happened.”²

As July gave way to August, Monroe and Hamilton continued to write each other, neither backing down from his position and both alluding to the option of deciding the matter through a duel. In a letter written on August 4, Hamilton informed Monroe that his second (representative, in dueling parlance), Philadelphia merchant William Jackson, was authorized “to communicate with you and to settle time and place.”³ Jackson met on August 6 and 7 with John Dawson, Monroe’s designated second. Both men denied that their principals had issued a challenge but noted that each was ready to accept if challenged by the other.



Aaron Burr

At this stage, Aaron Burr entered the picture. He had known Hamilton and Monroe since their joint service during the Revolutionary War, and during their subsequent political careers. Monroe wrote to Burr on August 6, asking him to ascertain whether Hamilton was issuing a direct challenge to Monroe, or replying to a challenge from Monroe:

If the former be the case, then you will accept it of course. If the latter then the expln. Which I give ends the affr., as I never meant to give him a challenge, on acct. of what has passed between us, seeing no cause to do so; having conceded nothing which as a man of honor and truth I ought not . . .⁴

Monroe went on to ask Burr to request three months’ time from Hamilton for arranging a duel, owing to Monroe’s need to finish his pamphlet on the French mission and settle family affairs, “especially when it is considered that in case of accident I shld. Leave Mrs. M. almost friendless in Virg., she being of New York.”⁵ Monroe’s use of the euphemism “accident” to describe his

possible death on the field of honor illustrates the veneer of formality that pervaded the rituals of dueling.

Burr's intercession appeared to break the impasse between Monroe and Hamilton. On August 9, Burr wrote to Monroe, stating:

I could not succeed in seeing Mr. H. Yesterday, but have had an interview with him this morning—The Thing will take an amicable Course and terminate, I believe to your Satisfaction. I am to meet H. again at eleven—but it will be impossible to communicate any thing further by this days mail—particulars tomorrow—

You may put this business wholly out of your Mind and devote your attention to that which is infinitely more suitable and important . . . God ever bless you⁶

With Burr's further assistance, Monroe finally agreed to issue the public statement Hamilton desired. Its brevity and stiffness mask the high-stakes human drama that had transpired:

Certificate

Philadelphia, August 16, 1797

I hereby certify that it was not my intention to give any satisfaction to, or opinion of my own, as to the entry which bears my single signature, in the papers containing an enquiry into Col. Hamilton's conduct, by messrs Muhlenburg Venable & myself in 1792, but that I meant it to stand on the credit of Mr. Clingman only upon whose application the entry was made.

James Monroe⁷

Aaron Burr's involvement in August 1797 to prevent a duel between Alexander Hamilton and James Monroe is one of the most ironic episodes in American history. Seven years later, on July 11, 1804, while Monroe was serving as an American diplomat in England, it was Burr and Hamilton who faced each other over pistols at Weehawken, New Jersey. The result has been the subject of much historical analysis, and is dramatized (alas, without references to Monroe) in a popular Broadway musical—perhaps you've heard of it . . .⁸

Notes

For more comprehensive accounts of the events and correspondence summarized in this article, see:

Cassandra Good, *That Time When Alexander Hamilton Almost Dueled James Monroe* (Smithsonian.Com, October 26, 2015). A thorough summary of the matter, written by the former associate editor of the Papers of James Monroe.

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/time-when-alexander-hamilton-almost-dueled-james-monroe-180957045/>

Sarah Pruitt, *The Sex Scandal That Ruined Alexander Hamilton's Chances of Becoming President* (History.Com, *History Stories*, April 20, 2018). An account of the Reynolds Affair that compares and contrasts it with the scandal surrounding Stormy Daniels and Donald Trump.

<https://www.history.com/news/alexander-hamilton-maria-reynolds-pamphlet-affair>

All of the documents cited in this article, and many more, may be accessed at the National Archives online collection Founders Online, <https://founders.archives.gov/>.

¹ David Gelston: "Account of an Interview between Alexander Hamilton and James Monroe," in Daniel Preston, ed., *The Papers of James Monroe, Volume 4: Selected Correspondence and Papers, 1796-1802* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, ABC-CLIO LLC, 2012), 159.

² Ibid.

³ Preston, 177.

⁴ Ibid. Aaron Burr became involved in the Reynolds Affair well before his intervention in the duel discussion between Hamilton and Monroe. In 1793, Maria Reynolds, already living with James Reynolds' erstwhile collaborator James Clingman, sued her husband for divorce. Burr was her attorney. See Nancy Isenberg, *Fallen Founder: The Life of Aaron Burr* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2007), 121.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Preston, 179.

⁷ Preston, 181.

⁸ For an analysis of how Lin-Manuel Miranda selectively used history to create his blockbuster musical Hamilton, see Joanne B. Freeman, How Hamilton Uses History: What Lin-Manuel Miranda included in his portrait of a heroic, complicated Founding Father—and what he left out (Slate.Com, November 11, 2015), http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2015/11/how_lin_manuel_miranda_used_real_history_in_writing_hamilton.html. Joanne Freeman will present the 31st annual James Monroe Lecture, *Dirty, Nasty Politics in James Monroe's America*, on Thursday, November 8, 2018, 7:00 PM, in the University of Mary Washington's Monroe Hall, Room 116.