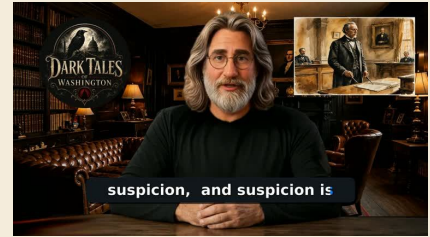




DARK TALES OF WASHINGTON ♦

The Burr Conspiracy

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Pull your chair close to the flames, friends, because tonight we follow a ruined man out of the light and into the great western dark. You'll remember the last time we sat here I told you how Aaron Burr, the Vice President of the United States, killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel on a New Jersey morning in 1804. That single shot destroyed him, Carol. He finished out his term a disgraced man, indicted for murder, welcome nowhere in polite society. And a lesser man might have crept away to die quiet. But not Burr. This is a true story, every word of it in the record, and it is the strangest treason tale in all of American history, because to this very day no one is entirely certain what the man was actually trying to do.

CAROL

No one knows what he was trying to do? Marty, how can there be a treason trial if nobody's sure of the crime? Where does a disgraced Vice President even go when the whole world has turned its back?



MARTY

West, Carol. Out past the Appalachian mountains, into the young country's wild frontier, where the Ohio and the Mississippi rivers ran down through half-settled territory toward the Spanish empire below. And there Burr began to weave a scheme so vast and so shadowy that historians still argue over it two centuries on. One story says he meant to raise a private army and march down to seize Spanish territory in Mexico, carving out an empire of his own with the crown of it on his head. Another says something far darker, Carol. That he meant to pull the western states and territories loose from the United States altogether, split the young nation clean in two, and rule the western half himself.

CAROL

Split the country in two. Marty, the ink was barely dry on the Constitution. He'd help tear the whole thing apart for his own crown? How does one broken man even begin such a monstrous thing?



MARTY

With charm, Carol, and he had it in abundance. He rode the frontier making friends, whispering to powerful men, courting the ministers of foreign governments who might bankroll him. And he found himself a staging ground, and oh, what a place it was. There was a great mansion on an island in the middle of the Ohio River, Blennerhassett Island, a lavish estate raised by a wealthy Irishman named Harman Blennerhassett who fell under Burr's spell entirely. On that island they began to gather the makings of the plot, Carol. Boats were built along the riverbank. Provisions were laid in. Young men, restless frontiersmen looking for adventure and fortune, began to drift in and take up arms.

CAROL

An island fortress in the middle of a river, boats and armed men gathering in the dark. Marty, that doesn't sound like a rumor at all, that sounds like a war getting ready to march. Surely someone in Washington caught wind of it?



MARTY

They did, Carol, and here the tale turns on the most treacherous figure in the whole affair. Burr's chief partner in the scheme was a man named General James Wilkinson, and you must understand who this man was. Wilkinson was the commanding general of the entire United States Army. The top soldier in the republic. And all the while, Carol, in secret, he was a paid spy in the pay of Spain. A traitor already, drawing a foreign salary, sitting at the very top of his own country's army. That is the man Aaron Burr chose to trust with his life.

CAROL

The head of the army, secretly bought and paid for by a foreign king. Marty, I can feel the trap closing already. A man like that, when the danger comes, which way does he jump?



MARTY

Whichever way saves his own skin, Carol, and that is exactly what he did. Burr had sent Wilkinson a letter, written partly in cipher, in code, laying out the movements of the plan. And when Wilkinson smelled the wind turning, when he sensed the whole thing might collapse and take him down with it, he betrayed his friend without a flicker of shame. He sat down and he altered that coded letter, doctored it, Carol, changed the words to erase his own guilt and blacken Burr all the deeper. And then he sent his poisoned version straight to the President of the United States, Thomas Jefferson, and denounced Aaron Burr as a traitor to the republic.

CAROL

He forged the very evidence and mailed it to the President. Marty, that's the man who ought to have hanged. What did Jefferson do when that letter landed on his desk?



MARTY

Jefferson moved like thunder, Carol. He had no love for Burr to begin with, and now he stood before the nation and declared Aaron Burr a traitor, guilty beyond question, and ordered him hunted down. And the net closed. Burr's grand scheme fell apart in his hands. His men scattered, the island was raided, and Burr himself fled through the wilderness in disguise, trying to reach Spanish Florida. But they caught him, Carol, down in the Mississippi Territory, a hunted fugitive, and they marched him near a thousand miles under guard, all the way back across the country to the city of Richmond, in Virginia, to stand trial for his life.

CAROL

A former Vice President dragged across the country in chains to answer for treason. Marty, with the President himself already calling him guilty, what chance did the poor man have? It sounds as though the verdict was written before he ever reached Richmond.



MARTY

You'd think so, Carol. But now this dark tale gives us its one great gift, and his name was John Marshall. The Chief Justice of the United States himself came down to preside over the trial in Richmond that summer of 1807, and the whole nation crowded in to watch. Jefferson wanted a conviction badly, threw the weight of the government behind it. But Marshall, Carol, was a man who bowed to nothing but the law. And the law on treason was written right there in the Constitution, deliberately, by men who remembered how kings had used the charge of treason to destroy anyone they pleased. Treason against the United States, it says, shall consist only in levying war against them. And no person shall be convicted unless on the testimony of two witnesses to the same overt act.

CAROL

Two witnesses, to the same act of war. Marty, say that plainly to me. What did that mean for a man like Burr, whose whole plot was whispers and letters and boats on an island?



MARTY

It meant everything, Carol. Marshall held to that line like iron. It was not enough, he ruled, to prove Burr had dreamed of treason, or plotted it, or wished for it. The government had to show an actual overt act of making war, and it had to bring two living witnesses who saw that same act with their own eyes. And when the prosecution was made to stand and deliver, Carol, they could not do it. There had been no battle. No war levied. Burr himself hadn't even been on the island when the men were gathered there. The mighty case was built on the word of a proven liar, General Wilkinson, and on suspicion, and suspicion is not proof. And so the jury returned, and Aaron Burr was acquitted. Found not guilty of treason against the United States.

CAROL

Acquitted. Marty, after all of that, he simply walked free? A man who very nearly tore the country in half, and the law let him go?



MARTY

The law let him go, Carol, because the law is greater than any one man's guilt, and Marshall knew that a nation that hangs a man on doctored letters and a President's anger is a nation with no law left at all. It stands to this day as the reason treason is so rarely charged in America. But do not think Burr walked away a winner. He was acquitted, Carol, and he was utterly, permanently ruined. The whole country believed him a traitor whether the court could prove it or not. His name was poison. Bankrupt and despised, he fled across the ocean to Europe, and there he wandered for years in poverty and exile, drifting from country to country, hungry, forgotten, once the second-highest man in all the United States, now a beggar on foreign shores.

CAROL

From Vice President to a penniless exile wandering Europe. Marty, that's a fall with no bottom to it. Did he ever find his way home again?



MARTY

He crept home at last, Carol, years later, under a changed name so no one would know him, and he lived out his final days in obscurity and quiet, a forgotten old man in a country that had once nearly been his to rule. He died in 1836, in a boarding house, with almost nothing to his name. And there our tale ends, in the ashes of a man who reached for an empire and lost even himself. Aaron Burr, who killed one founding father in the morning light and tried to break the republic in the western dark, brought down in the end not by an army, but by a single, stubborn line of the Constitution and one judge who would not bend it. That is the story, and it is all true. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I'll be thinking about old John Marshall holding to that hard rule when the whole country wanted blood, and how the law is never so precious as when it protects a man we're certain is guilty. Guard the rules even when they cost you the villain you wanted, hold to the truth over the mob, and always, always come back to the fire.