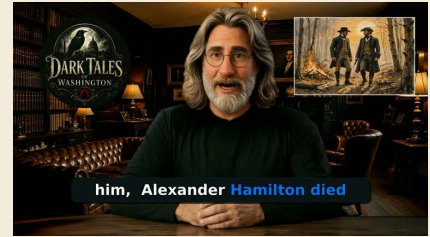




DARK TALES OF WASHINGTON ♦

The Burr-Hamilton Duel

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Come in close to the fire tonight, friends, because this one comes to us out of the raw dawn light of the young American republic, out of the year 1804, from a lonely wooded ledge above the Hudson River called the heights of Weehawken. This is the tale of two of the most brilliant men that new nation ever produced, Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton, and how a lifetime of bitterness between them ended at ten paces with a pair of pistols. It is a true tale, Carol, every word of it in the record, and it is a tale of pride, and of honor, and of how honor can kill a man.

CAROL

Oh, Marty, I have heard those two names my whole life but never the whole of what passed between them. Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton. Tell me first, who were they to each other, before it ever came to pistols?



MARTY

They were rivals, Carol, of the deepest and oldest kind. Picture the new nation, barely a generation old, the ink hardly dry on the Constitution, and here are these two men climbing to the very top of it. Hamilton, the orphan boy from the Caribbean who rose to be General Washington's right hand and the first Secretary of the Treasury, the man who built the nation's banks and its credit out of nothing. And Burr, the polished New York lawyer and senator, grandson of a great preacher, charming, brilliant, ambitious as the day is long. They circled each other for years in the courtrooms and the politics of New York, and Hamilton came to distrust Burr to the very marrow of his bones. He thought Burr a man of no fixed principle, a man who wanted power for its own sake, and he said so, Carol, again and again, in letters and in parlors all over the country.

CAROL

So it was not one insult but a slow poison, built up over years. And Hamilton did not keep these opinions quiet. Did Burr know what was being said of him behind his back?



MARTY

He knew, Carol, and worse than that, twice it cost him everything. In the election of 1800, Burr and Thomas Jefferson tied in the electoral vote, and the whole thing was thrown into the House of Representatives to decide, ballot after ballot, day after day. And who threw his weight against Burr? Hamilton. He could not abide Jefferson's politics, but he trusted Burr even less, and he worked every lever he had to see Jefferson made president and Burr shut out. So Burr became merely the Vice President, a man in the shadows. And then in 1804, Burr reached for the governorship of New York, hoping to rebuild himself, and once again Hamilton was there in the background, whispering, writing, campaigning against him. Burr lost that too. And now, Carol, a proud man had been ruined twice by the same hand.

CAROL

Twice by the same man. I can feel the pressure of it building, Marty, like a storm that has to break somewhere. What finally lit the fuse?



MARTY

A newspaper, Carol, and a single dreadful word. After that governor's race, a letter turned up printed in the Albany papers, written by a Dr. Charles Cooper, and in it Cooper reported that at a dinner party Hamilton had called Burr a dangerous man, one who ought not be trusted with the reins of government. That alone Burr might have swallowed. But then came the sentence that finished it. Cooper wrote that he could describe a still more despicable opinion which Hamilton had expressed of Mr. Burr. Despicable, Carol. In that age, among men of that class, that word was a loaded gun all by itself. It meant a stain on a man's honor that only blood could wash clean.

CAROL

Despicable. Just one word in a newspaper, and yet you say it was as good as a challenge. So Burr read that, and what did he do? Did he go straight to Hamilton?



MARTY

He did it the way gentlemen did it then, Carol, through letters, cold and formal and deadly. Burr wrote to Hamilton and demanded a prompt and unqualified acknowledgment or denial of that despicable word. And Hamilton, being a lawyer to his fingertips, tried to split hairs. He wrote back that he could not answer for another man's word, that Burr must say what specific charge he meant, that despicable was too vague a thing to disavow. Back and forth the letters went, each one stiffer and colder than the last, the seconds carrying them between the two men. This was the code duello, Carol, the elaborate rules of honor, and once those wheels began to turn, neither man could step off the road without being branded a coward before the whole nation. And for men like these, Carol, that was a fate worse than the pistol.

CAROL

So they were both trapped by it, in a way. Neither one truly free to say, this is madness, let us stop. Marty, did Hamilton want this? Did he truly want to stand and shoot at another man?



MARTY

No, Carol, and this is the part that breaks the heart. Hamilton did not want it at all. The night before, he sat up and wrote out his private thoughts, and he wrote that he had religious and moral scruples against dueling, that he had resolved to reserve and throw away his first fire, and even his second, to give Mr. Burr a chance to reflect and come to his senses. And there was a wound in him deeper than politics, Carol. Three years before, on that very same dueling ground at Weehawken, Hamilton's own beloved son Philip, just nineteen years old, had been shot and killed in a duel defending his father's name. That ground had already drunk the blood of his boy. And now the father was rowing across the same river to the same lonely ledge, to face the same fate.

CAROL

Oh, Marty. His own son, on that same spot. I can hardly bear it. How does a father even set foot in that boat? Take me to that morning. What did the dawn look like?



MARTY

It was the morning of July the eleventh, 1804, Carol, and it was already warm. Dueling was a crime in New York, so both men had to cross the Hudson into New Jersey, to that narrow wooded shelf below the Palisades where the ground was flat enough to fight. Hamilton was rowed across the still gray water in the early light, his second beside him, the pistols in their polished wooden case. Burr had crossed before him and was already there, waiting in his shirtsleeves, clearing the brush from the ledge. The seconds measured off the ground, ten full paces between the marks, and they loaded the pistols in plain sight of one another, as the rules required. The river lay silver below, the birds were waking in the trees, and two of the finest minds in America stood facing each other in the new day's light with death loaded in their hands.

CAROL

Ten paces. In the quiet of the morning with the birds singing. And then, Marty. Then the word was given. Tell me what happened.



MARTY

The second gave the word, Carol, and two shots cracked out over the water, so close together that men argued forever after which came first. But this much the record tells us. Hamilton's ball went high and wide, snapping through the leaves of a cedar tree far above Burr's head, well off to the side, just as he had told his friends he meant to throw his shot away. Burr's ball did not go wide. It struck Hamilton low in the right side, tore through his body, and lodged against his spine. Hamilton rose up on his toes, twisted, and fell to the ground, and he knew at once it was mortal. This is a mortal wound, doctor, he said. They carried him down to the boat and rowed him back across the Hudson, back to New York, and there in a friend's house, with his wife Eliza and their children around him, Alexander Hamilton died the following afternoon, the fourteenth of July, in terrible pain, forty-nine years old.

CAROL

The very river he had crossed at dawn, carrying him home to die. And Burr, Marty? A sitting Vice President of the United States had just shot a man dead. What in the world became of him?



MARTY

It destroyed him, Carol, as surely as his ball destroyed Hamilton. The nation recoiled in horror. Here was Hamilton mourned as a fallen founder, and here was Burr, the Vice President, indicted for murder in two states at once, in New York and New Jersey both, forced to flee south while the charges hung over him. He served out the last of his term as Vice President almost as a ghost, presiding over the Senate while wanted for murder, and when it was done his career in respectable public life was finished forever. He drifted west into strange schemes, and a few years later he was hauled before a court and tried for treason, for a wild plot they said aimed to carve an empire out of the western lands. He was acquitted, Carol, but it hardly mattered. Aaron Burr lived on for decades, but he lived as a broken and ruined man, the most gifted outcast in America, remembered for one thing only, the morning he killed Alexander Hamilton.

CAROL

Two brilliant men, Marty, and one dawn undid them both. It is such a waste of everything they were. When you sit here by the fire and turn it over, what do you make of it all?



MARTY

I make of it this, Carol. Here were two men who had helped to build a nation out of nothing, men of dazzling gifts, who had every reason to grow old and honored, and instead they let a lifetime of pride and grievance and a single ugly word in a newspaper carry them to a lonely ledge at dawn. One of them lost his life, and the other lost everything that made life worth having, and all of it for a thing they called honor. It reminds us how young and how raw that republic was, Carol, a world where a difference of opinion could still be settled with powder and ball, and how thin the line has always been between greatness and ruin. So when you feel your own pride rising, friends, and some old grievance whispering that only satisfaction will do, remember Weehawken, and the cedar tree, and the boat rowing a dying man home across the river. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I'll be thinking of Eliza Hamilton at that bedside, and of two clever, prideful men who could forgive the world everything but each other. Let the small insults go, hold your loved ones closer than your grudges, and always, always come back to the fire.