

John Pierre Burr by Sherri Burr

Aaron Burr Jr. and John Pierre Burr: A Founding Father and his Abolitionist Son

By Sherri Burr

Aaron Burr Jr. (Class of 1772), the third Vice President of the United States, fathered two children by a woman of color from Calcutta, India. Their son, John Pierre Burr (1792-1864), would become an activist, abolitionist, and conductor on the Underground Railroad.

Introduction

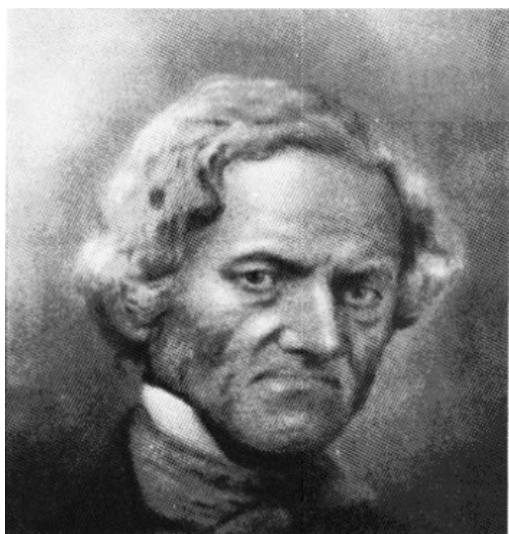


Figure 1 - Portrait of John Pierre Burr, son of Aaron Burr Jr. ('1772) and Mary Emmons of Calcutta, India.

John Pierre Burr was born on August 24, 1792, the son of a Princeton alumnus, the grandson of a Princeton co-founding trustee and its second president, as well as the great-grandson of Princeton's third president. Yet despite such an illustrious pedigree, John Pierre was not eligible to attend the College of New Jersey, as Princeton was then known. His mother was a person of color who had been born in Kolkata (Calcutta), India, and the college did not admit people of color to its student body at the time.

John Pierre also differed from his father, Aaron Burr Jr., his grandfather, Aaron Burr Sr., and his great-grandfather, Jonathan Edwards, in another way: while they were all slaveholders during their lifetimes, John Pierre became an abolitionist and conductor on the Underground Railroad.

Aaron Burr Jr. and Slavery

Aaron Burr Jr., was born into a slaveholding family on February 6, 1756. When his father, the Reverend Aaron Burr Sr., moved into the College of New Jersey's President's House in 1756, he brought with him at least one, and possibly two, slaves.^[1] Despite having written about the evils of slavery, Burr Sr. purchased Caesar in 1756 for 80 pounds from John Livingston, a member of a prominent New York family.^[2] Caesar would have lived in the slave quarters on the second floor of the "Kitchen House," adjacent to the main residence. After Burr Sr. died in 1757, his estate also included an additional slave named Harry.

When Burr Sr.'s father-in-law, the Reverend Jonathan Edwards, assumed the College's presidency next, he too brought slaves to the President's House. Considered one of the great

John Pierre Burr by Sherri Burr

American religious thinkers of his time,[3] Edwards had preached the gospel to Native Americans as well as preached against the evils of the slave trade, yet he owned an enslaved married couple named Joseph and Sue. Since many biblical tales portrayed enslaved people, it is possible that Edwards accepted Joseph and Sue's status because of this biblical precedent. Joseph and Sue most likely lived in Edwards's household when his grandchildren, Sally and Aaron Jr., came to reside with him after the death of their father. Sadly, Edwards himself died in March 1758, followed by his daughter Esther Edwards Burr, Sally and Burr Jr.'s mother, in April, and his wife Sarah Edwards on October 2, 1758.

Before the age of three, Aaron Burr Jr. had lost both parents and maternal grandparents. His paternal grandparents had died before he and his sister Sally were born. The young children were shuffled among relatives and friends for two years, which may also have felt traumatic, before finding a permanent childhood home with their uncle Timothy Edwards, their mother's younger brother, and his wife. From age four to thirteen, Burr Jr. resided in the household of a relative who did not own slaves.

However, when he entered Princeton as a 13-year-old sophomore in 1769 (his request to be admitted as a junior and his previous application as an 11-year-old were both denied),[4] Burr Jr. once again "lived within a landscape of slavery,"[5] eleven years after the death of his grandfather. John Witherspoon, the college's sixth president (1768-1794), owned at least two slaves. Although Witherspoon encouraged the religious education of free and enslaved blacks, he also argued against complete emancipation of all slaves. College guidelines prohibited students from bringing personal slaves to serve them at Princeton, but enslaved people were part of the fabric of campus life.[6]

Following his graduation from Princeton in 1772, Burr Jr. trained in theology, seeking perhaps to follow in the footsteps of his father and grandfather. He then switched to reading law with

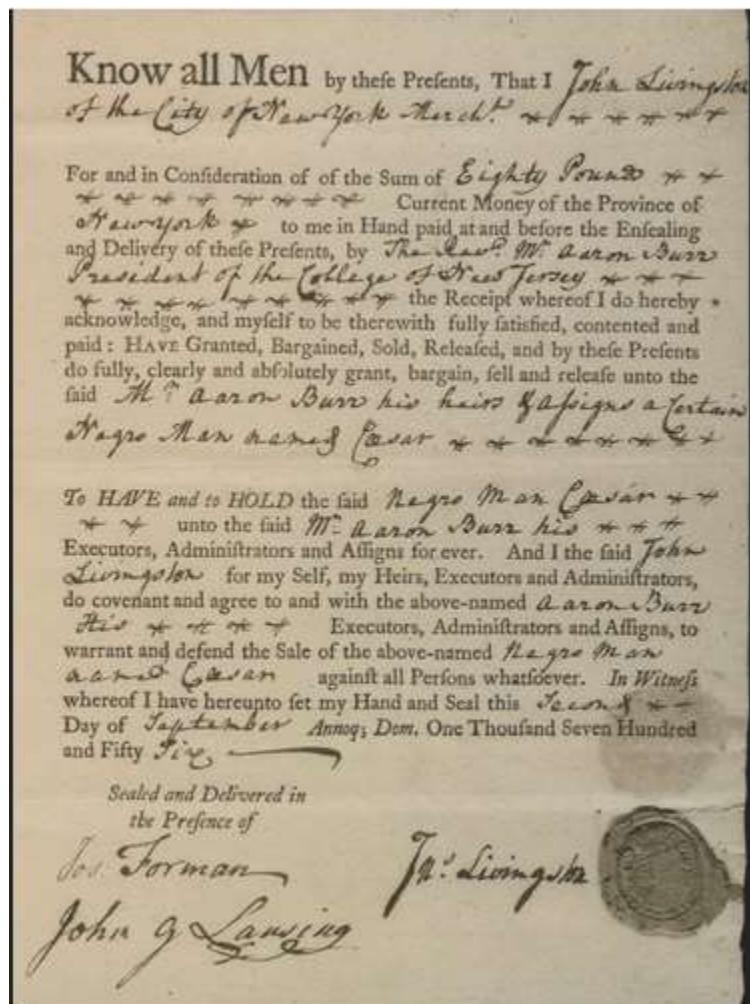


Figure 2 - Bill of sale for an enslaved man named Caesar, whom Princeton president Aaron Burr Sr. purchased in 1756.

John Pierre Burr by Sherri Burr

Tapping Reeve, a Princeton graduate (A.B., 1763, A.M., 1766), who would become Burr Jr.'s brother-in-law after marrying Sally Burr. In August 1775, Burr Jr. joined the Revolutionary War effort as a 19-year old. During the course of the war, he would have been exposed to the presence of free black soldiers, who may have enlightened his views on race. Free blacks had immediately joined and fought alongside whites during the initial battles of the Revolutionary War at Lexington, Concord, and the Battle of Bunker Hill.[7] Although General George Washington initially resisted the idea of integrated troops, he relented after observing some of the early enlistees fight with courage. On December 31, 1775, Washington wrote to Congress requesting permission to allow free blacks to re-enlist.[8]

One of the free black soldiers who re-enlisted multiple times in the Fifth Pennsylvania Regiment was a man named John Emery, whose daughter Hester Elizabeth would later marry Burr Jr.'s son, John Pierre Burr. Emery's name appears on the Company Muster Rolls twenty-four times, including four times at Valley Forge, where Burr Jr. also wintered from 1777 to 1778.[9] The winter at Valley Forge is legendary for the lack of food and other supplies that soldiers endured, compelling Washington's men to eat their horses and track bleeding footprints through the snow.[10]

A little over five miles from Valley Forge, at the pass known as the Gulph or Gulph Mills, Burr Jr. cemented his reputation as a leader by curtailing a plot hatched by a group of soldiers who resented their rigorous drilling.[11] According to the Memoirs of Aaron Burr, the 21-year old colonel armed himself with a well-sharpened sabre and ordered his detachment to form at night, after having secretly removed the bullet cartridges from their weapons. As he marched the line, a soldier advanced a step and leveled his weapon at Colonel Burr while calling out, "Now is your time, my boys." [12] Burr Jr. "smote the arm of the mutineer above the elbow, and nearly severed it from his body, ordering him, at the same time, to take and keep his place in line." [13] A few minutes later, Burr Jr. dismissed the line and the mutineer's arm was amputated the next day. According to the Memoirs, "No more was heard of the mutiny nor were there afterwards, during Colonel Burr's command, any false alarms." [14]

Following the conclusion of his military service, Aaron Burr Jr. was primarily referred to as Colonel Burr the remainder of his life. He received a license to practice law and became a slaveholder for the first time in his adult life when he married Theodosia Prevost. When Theodosia's first husband died, he listed slaves in his will.[15] Under the laws in effect at that time, when Burr Jr. married Theodosia he acquired dominion over her property, including any slaves and servants bequeathed to her.

Burr Jr. would follow in the contradictory model of his father and grandfather by pontificating against slavery while owning slaves himself. However, he would become the first in his line to try to legally end the country's "original sin," as slavery had been termed. In 1785, as a New York Assemblyman, Burr Jr. introduced a bill proposing the immediate and unconditional end of slavery for all blacks, but that bill was rejected 33 to 13 in favor of a gradual emancipation plan that passed by 36 to 11.[16] The final bill, which Burr Jr. opposed, was never enacted.[17] It proposed to restrict the civil liberties of free blacks to vote, hold political office, intermarry with

John Pierre Burr by Sherri Burr

whites, and testify against whites in any court in the state.[18] These were rights already guaranteed to free blacks under the New York Constitution of 1777.

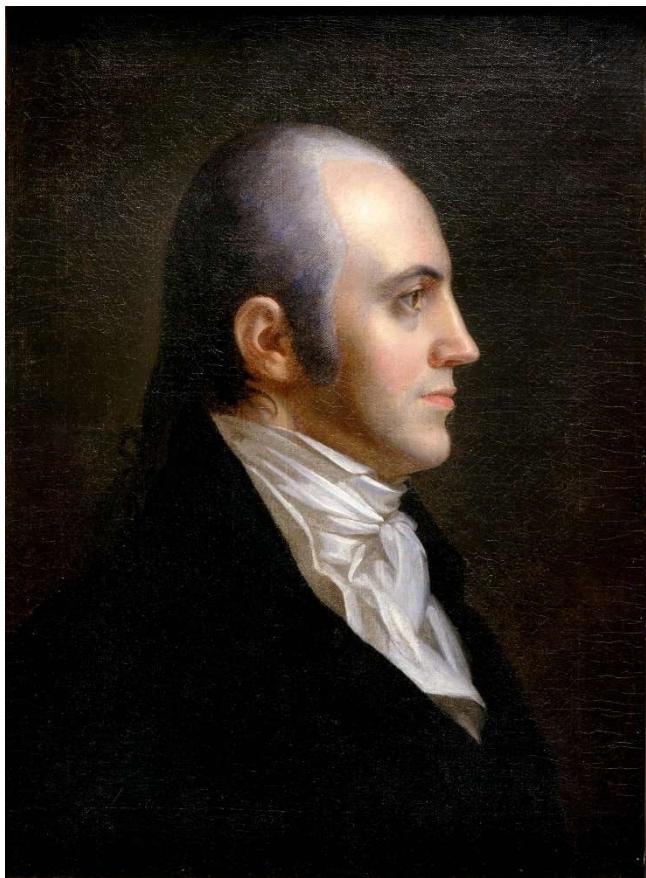


Figure 3 - Portrait of Aaron Burr Jr. (Class of 1772), the second Vice President of the United States.

According to one historian, Burr Jr. "appears to have viewed slavery as a temporary condition of servitude rather than a status based on racial inferiority."[19] In his law practice, he represented two manumitted slaves who successfully sued for their portion of their white slaveholder-father's estate.[20] Unlike most men of his status, he also ensured that his daughter Theodosia and his slaves were educated. He insisted that his house slave Tom learn to read and write and Carlos learn to play the violin.[21] In a letter, he expressed shock that a friend of his had "mocked the idea that Carlos might learn to play the violin."[22] Burr Jr. also paid for his slave Peggy to attend school. In 1799, after he returned to the New York Assembly, a gradual abolition bill was finally passed. He supported this bill because, unlike in the 1785 bill, the rights of free blacks were preserved.

Burr Jr.'s Family of Color

In 1787 or before, Colonel Burr commenced a relationship with Mary Eugénie Beauharnais Emmons. Born in Kolkata (Calcutta), India, around 1760, she first migrated to Haiti, where her original Indian name was abandoned to become Eugénie Beauharnais, and then to the United States where that name was changed to Mary Emmons. There is sufficient documentary evidence indicating several families of Beauharnais lived in Haiti at the time she would have resided there and took their last name.

Emmons had her life recently imagined in Susan Holloway Scott's novel *The Secret Wife of Aaron Burr* (New York: Kensington Press, 2019). Scott acknowledges in her afterword that "the majority of Mary's story as I've chosen to tell it is my invention."^[23] Unfortunately, an Indian publication^[24] did not read the disclaimer before it took story elements in Scott's novel to be truthful statements. The John Pierre Burr (JPB) family oral history that has been passed down for generations to Dr. Allen Ballard, a third great-grandson of JPB, proclaims that Mary was

John Pierre Burr by Sherri Burr

born in Calcutta, India, and not Pondicherry as depicted in Scott's novel. Emmons was more likely Bengali (a Calcutta ethnicity) than Tamil (from Pondicherry). Scott created the Indian name of Veeya[25] for Mary Emmons, whereas her original Indian name has not yet been rediscovered. Scott also invented that Emmons was the product of the rape of her Indian mother by English soldiers, and that Emmons was sold into slavery as an 8-year old.[26] There is no JPB oral or written family history to support such novelistic developments as true.

Emmons was most likely brought from Haiti to North America by James Marcus Prevost, the first husband of Theodosia Prevost. He had been stationed in Haiti between 1772 and 1773 as a Lieutenant Colonel in the British army and returned to the Hermitage. After Prevost's death from Yellow Fever in 1781 in Jamaica, Aaron Burr Jr. married Theodosia Prevost in 1782. Mary Emmons became part of their household. At the time of her nuptials, Theodosia was most likely already afflicted with cancer and her health steadily declined until her death in 1794.[27]

During the first six years of their marriage, Theodosia and Aaron Burr Jr. had four children, one of whom died in infancy (in October, 1788). Two children were stillborn in February 1787 and July 1788.[28] Their first-born daughter, also named Theodosia, lived to adulthood. She died at sea at the age of 30. Her only child, Aaron Burr Alston, predeceased her.

By contrast, Burr Jr.'s children with Mary Emmons, Louisa Charlotte born in 1788 and John Pierre born in 1792, survived to adulthood and had produced children and grandchildren who were living when Burr Jr. died at the age of 80 in 1836. John Pierre was born at sea as his mother traveled back from a visit to Haiti. There are Pennsylvania official records confirming his birth in the Navy Yard in 1792. This record contradicts the speculation in Susan Holloway Scott's lively novel that he was born in New York. Nevertheless, it is true that Burr Jr. impregnated Mary Emmons twice while he was married to Theodosia Prevost. That both his wife and servant gave birth during the same year (1788) indicates Burr Jr. was having intimate relations with both women around the same time.

In some of her letters, Theodosia Prevost Burr refers to a child as "Lou," "Louise," and "Louisa." [29] This child can only be Louisa Charlotte Burr because Theodosia's two daughters by the names of Anna Louisa and Mary Louisa with her first husband had died in infancy before her relationship with Burr Jr. began. Louisa Charlotte Burr wrote several letters to Col. Burr, which he saved. Some archivists and historians may have mistakenly attributed them to a Louisa Charlotte Prevost Palmer, the name of one of Burr Jr.'s legal clients who was a great niece of Col. James Marcus Prevost who died before she was born, because they did not know (1) about Louisa Charlotte Burr, (2) that Anna Louisa and Mary Louisa Prevost died in infancy, and (3) Theodosia did not have a daughter named Louisa Charlotte Prevost, nor did either of her two sons marry a Louisa Charlotte or name their daughters Louisa Charlotte.

In one of Louisa Charlotte's letters, she asked Burr Jr. to send a miniature of her "beloved Theodosia" so that her brother could copy it for her. While the date of the later is not known (it could have been written before or after Theodosia, Burr Jr.'s daughter, perished at sea), it does

John Pierre Burr by Sherri Burr

attest that there was a relationship between Burr Jr.'s three children (Theodosia, Louisa Charlotte, and John Pierre) who survived to adulthood. John Pierre was also a known painter.

In 2005, the Aaron Burr Association confirmed that "family oral and recorded history in combination with a plethora of circumstantial evidence builds a convincing case for substantiating the existence of Aaron Burr's second family." [30]

Although whites could legally marry free people of color in New York at the time Burr Jr. commenced his relationship with Mary Emmons, he was still married to Theodosia Prevost when Louisa Charlotte and John Pierre were born. Burr Jr. kept this family of color secret throughout the entirety of his political life.

When Burr Jr. and Thomas Jefferson received Electoral College votes in the 1796 presidential election, Louisa Charlotte was about eight years old and John Pierre was nearing the age of four. In that election, John Adams was elected president with 71 votes, Thomas Jefferson was elected vice-president with 68 votes, and Burr Jr. came in fourth with 30 votes. [31]

In the election of 1800, when his children of color were about twelve and eight, Burr Jr. tied with Jefferson in the Electoral College. At the time, electors did not vote separately for president and vice president; rather, the person with the highest votes won the presidency and the second-highest won the vice-presidency. Because Jefferson and Burr Jr. both won 73 electoral votes (the incumbent John Adams won only 65 votes), the election was decided by the House of Representatives. After 36 ballots and the intervention of Alexander Hamilton, who threw his support behind Jefferson, the primary author of the Declaration of Independence became the nation's third president and Burr was elected its third vice president. Both men sworn into the nation's two highest offices were fathers to children of color. [32]

Following the conclusion of his vice presidency in 1805, Burr Jr. migrated west, with some claiming that he planned to create an independent state and become Emperor of Mexico. This led President Jefferson to have him unsuccessfully tried for treason, twice. [33] After his acquittals, Burr Jr. crossed the Atlantic Ocean and lived in Europe for four years, including the time he spent in Paris between 1810 and 1811. John Pierre was 18 and his sister Louisa Charlotte was 22, both adults, when he set sail. Their half-sister Theodosia was living in South Carolina with her family. Even had Burr Jr. remained in the United States, he was impoverished and could have offered little support to his family of color. John Pierre became a barber and his sister Louisa Charlotte a housekeeper.

Unlike three of Thomas Jefferson's children of color who married into white society, Louisa Charlotte and John Pierre both married free blacks in Pennsylvania. Louisa Charlotte married Frances Webb, a founding member of the Pennsylvania Augustine Education Society. The Webbs also became active participants in the Haytian Emigration Society to encourage Free Blacks to migrate to Haiti (then Hayti). [34] Louisa Charlotte and her husband were returning from the island in November 7, 1826 when their daughter Mary Webb died at the age of two. After their youngest son Frank J. Webb became an adult, he wrote the The Garies and Their

John Pierre Burr by Sherri Burr

Friends, the second published novel by an African American author, in 1857. The novel included a preface signed by Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of Uncle Tom's Cabin. She wrote that the novel's incidents "are mostly true ones, woven together by a slight web of fiction."^[35]

John Pierre married Hester (Hetty) Elizabeth Emery on May 15, 1817, in St. Thomas Church in Philadelphia. As mentioned earlier, Hetty was the daughter of John Emery, who had served as a private in Pennsylvania's Fifth Regiment during the Revolutionary War.^[36] John Pierre's barbershop became a station on the Underground Railroad. He cut the hair of white men during the day, while he and Hetty hid self-liberating slaves in their Philadelphia home at Fifth and Locust (then Prune) streets in the attic, a cave in the cellar, and a deep hole in the backyard at night.^[37] John Emery Burr, the eldest of John Pierre and Hetty's ten children, remembered his parents telling him to ignore the noises in the cellar or attic.^[38] The runaways would remain in the family home until John Pierre could safely transport them at night to their next conductor, who would see them to a meeting with Lucretia Mott, a Quaker abolitionist, and onwards to Canada.

John Pierre also became an organizer of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society, and Hetty co-organized the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society with Lucretia Mott and attended the Women's Anti-Slavery Conventions in 1838 and 1839.^[39] Her friends included white abolitionists Sarah and Angelina Grimke.^[40] A literate man, John Pierre served as an agent for William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist newspaper, The Liberator, and he published the Journal of the American Reform Society.^[41] Additionally, John Pierre served as the president of the Moral Reform Retreat to assist alcoholics, while Hetty, a dressmaker, helped free black women obtain jobs and was active in the Colored Female Free Produce Society.^[42]

In political life, John Pierre protested the disenfranchisement of free blacks by the Pennsylvania state legislature in 1838—similar to his father voting against disenfranchising free blacks as a member of the New York State Assembly in 1785. One of John Pierre's last acts was to sign a petition, along with famous abolitionist Frederick Douglass, to encourage free black men to join the U.S. Colored Troops to fight in the Civil War. John Pierre's eldest son, John Emery Burr, answered the call and mustered into the U.S. Colored Troops, following in the footsteps of his grandfathers, Colonel Aaron Burr Jr. and Private John Emery, who had both served in the Revolutionary War. The U.S. Colored Troops played a significant role in the fighting, including their participation in the Battle of the Crater outside of Petersburg, to end the Civil War. The 41st United States Colored Infantry was present when Confederate General Robert E. Lee surrendered his army to Union General Ulysses S. Grant in April 1865.^[43]

John Pierre actually practiced the antislavery beliefs professed by his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. Although John Pierre was sometimes referred to as Colonel Burr's "illegitimate son" or "natural son" during his lifetime, according to Harvard-educated historian and JPB third great-grandson, Dr. Allen Ballard, Burr Jr. actually married Mary Emmons in Haiti following the death of his wife Theodosia.^[44] Such a marriage would have legitimized both John Pierre and Louisa Charlotte. Ballard's mother, a JPB second great-granddaughter witnessed the destruction of the marriage certificate by her Aunt Doll,^[45] a JPB great-

John Pierre Burr by Sherri Burr

granddaughter, who had become upset that few relatives were interested in the family's history.

The Burr Family Legacy

On September 29, 2018, the Aaron Burr Association voted unanimously to formally acknowledge that Aaron Burr Jr. had fathered two children by Mary Emmons and that all their descendants are legitimate members of the Burr family. This vote was memorialized in the headstone affixed to John Pierre's gravesite and consecrated on August 24, 2019, in the

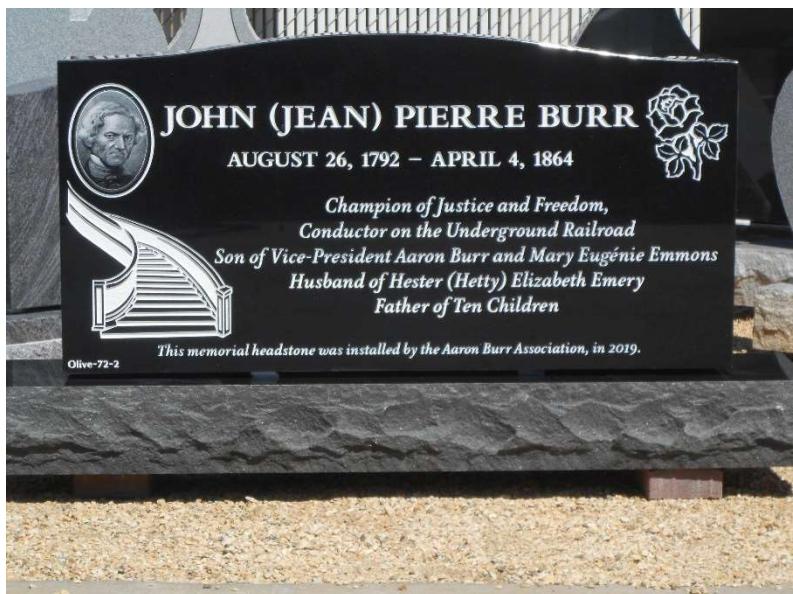


Figure 4 - Headstone of John Pierre Burr, son of Princeton alumnus and Vice President of the United States Aaron Burr Jr.

presence of the Sons of the American Revolution Color Guard at Eden Cemetery outside of Philadelphia.

As Aaron Burr Association President Stuart Fisk Johnson said at the event, "A few people didn't want to go into it because Aaron's first wife, Theodosia, was still alive and dying of cancer at the time of John Pierre's birth."^[46] Johnson continued, "But the embarrassment is not as important as it is to acknowledge and embrace actual living, robust, accomplished children."^[47]

About the Author

Sherri Burr, a Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs graduate (*1988), also obtained degrees from Mount Holyoke College and the Yale Law School. In 1988, she joined the faculty of the University of New Mexico School of Law. She retired as the Dickason Chair in Law Emerita to become a full-time author. Her 27th book, *Complicated Lives: Free Blacks in Virginia, 1619-1865*, was published in 2019 by Carolina Academic Press. This web submission is adapted from *Complicated Lives* and her next book, *Aaron Burr's Family of Color*. A descendant of John Pierre Burr, Sherri Burr serves as the Aaron Burr Association's Third Vice-President.

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John Pierre Burr by Sherri Burr

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John Pierre Burr by Sherri Burr

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Source: Sherri Burr, *Aaron Burr Jr. and John Pierre Burr: A Founding Father and his Abolitionist Son*, accessed 20 May 2020, slavery.princeton.edu/stories/Jean-Pierre-Burr