

Washington Post Article on John Pierre Burr and Professor Sherri Burr

Aaron Burr — villain of ‘Hamilton’ — had a secret family of color, new research shows
The vice president is best known for killing rival Alexander Hamilton in an 1804 duel. But he was also a notorious rake, historians say.

By Hannah Natanson

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A depiction of the duel between then-Vice President Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton at Weehawken, N.J., in 1804. The fight would end Hamilton's life and forever soil Burr's reputation. (Manuel Balce Ceneta/AP)

Within a week of her arrival at Princeton University, Sherri Burr received a puzzling phone call.

The caller, another student, said Sherri was invited to a Burr family meeting — “Burr” as in Aaron Burr, the third vice president of the United States and villain of “Hamilton,” the astronomically popular musical. Aaron Burr’s father co-founded Princeton, the caller told her, so all descendants who attend

the school are summoned to regular gatherings.

“I took a look down at my brown skin and thought, ‘Well, that doesn’t apply to me,’ ” said Sherri Burr, who was getting her graduate degree from Princeton. “So I never went.”

Decades later, she learned the truth. Sherri Burr, a 59-year-old professor at the University of New Mexico, is descended from John Pierre Burr, who is almost certainly Aaron Burr’s son. John Pierre is the most prominent member of a larger family of color whom Burr kept secret and who flew under the historical radar — except as titillating gossip — until now.

After years of extensive digging inspired by a desire to know more about her ancestry, Sherri Burr concluded that John Pierre’s long-rumored parentage was legitimate. According to her findings, Aaron Burr fathered two children, John Pierre and a girl, Louisa Charlotte, with a woman of color named Mary Emmons, who hailed from Kolkata, India, and worked as a servant in the Burrs’ home for several years.

Last year, Sherri Burr joined the Aaron Burr Association, a Maryland-based society of descendants and history buffs that works to understand and promote Aaron Burr’s life and legacy. After she presented her research to the association at its annual meeting in September, the nonprofit group voted unanimously to acknowledge that John Pierre was Aaron Burr’s son.

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Historians contacted by The Washington Post said the evidence Sherri Burr collected seems convincing.

Some of its roughly 75 members gathered in a historic black cemetery in a Philadelphia suburb to install a headstone declaring John Pierre's ancestry on what is now an unmarked grave. The stone also celebrates John Pierre's accomplishments: He was a barber, a prominent member of Philadelphia's elite black society (he married a free black woman). He also was a crucial leader in the city's leg of the Underground Railroad. The installation is timed to coincide with the 400th anniversary of enslaved Africans' arrival in North America.



The brand-new headstone for John Pierre Burr lists his parentage and describes his achievements, including his vital service to the Underground Railroad in Philadelphia. (Hannah Natanson/The Washington Post)

“Champion of Justice and Freedom,” the headstone reads in white italics on shiny black stone. “Conductor on the Underground Railroad. Son of Vice-President Aaron Burr.”

Stuart Fisk Johnson, the president of the Aaron Burr Association and a descendant of Aaron Burr, said the recognition is long overdue.

“A few people didn’t want to go into it because Aaron’s first wife, Theodosia, was still alive, and dying of cancer” when Aaron Burr fathered John Pierre, Johnson said. “But the embarrassment is not as important as it is to acknowledge

and embrace actual living, robust, accomplished children.”

Annette Gordon-Reed, a Harvard professor whose Pulitzer Prize-winning scholarship led to widespread acceptance of Thomas Jefferson’s relationship with the enslaved Sally Hemings, said she had heard rumors that Aaron Burr had a son of color, but this “is not something that is generally known.”

Gordon-Reed called Aaron Burr the “fallen founder,” referencing a term coined by Nancy Isenberg, a Louisiana State University professor who wrote the most comprehensive biography of Aaron Burr to date. Isenberg’s book “Fallen Founder: The Life of Aaron Burr,” published over a decade ago, makes little to no mention of Emmons, John Pierre or Louisa Charlotte. (Isenberg was traveling and could not be reached for comment.)

Though Lin-Manuel Miranda’s Broadway play portrayed Burr as an unprincipled foil to Alexander Hamilton, the academic “jury is still out” on whether the third vice president was truly wicked, Gordon-Reed said. Either way, she said, he shaped the fate of the country by

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delivering votes to Thomas Jefferson in the 1800 presidential election, was a “pivotal figure” in New York history and at one point almost became president himself. But for over 200 years, Burr has been best known for murdering his rival in a duel.

The revelation of John Pierre’s parentage could alter the way people write about Aaron Burr going forward, Gordon-Reed said. “There are a lot of stories that we don’t know about members of the founding generation,” she said.

The reality that emerges from Sherri Burr’s new research is complex.

Mary Emmons originally came to the United States to work as a servant in the household of British officer Jacques Marcus Prevost and Theodosia Bartow Prevost, who — after a secret affair and Jacques Prevost’s death — became the wife of Aaron Burr.

When Theodosia married Burr and moved to a new home in New York in the early 1780s, Emmons followed her. That’s likely where she got to know Aaron Burr, a known ladies’ man with a voracious sexual appetite. (The former vice president is “to this day ... known principally as a rake,” Isenberg wrote in “Fallen Founder.”)

Burr’s first child with Theodosia was born in 1783; his first child with Emmons, Louisa Charlotte, was born about five years after that. John Pierre was born in circa 1792.

It does not appear that Burr kept both families in the same house, Sherri Burr said. Around the time of Louisa Charlotte and John Pierre’s births, Emmons was living in Philadelphia, at the place Aaron Burr stayed while doing work in the U.S. Senate (which met at the time in Philadelphia’s Congress Hall). Burr served as a senator from New York between 1791 and 1797.



The ceremony, held in a historic black cemetery, featured a five-member Color Guard dressed in Revolutionary War uniforms. The fivesome opened, closed and supervised proceedings. (Hannah Natanson/The Washington Post)

Theodosia, meanwhile, was at the Burrs’ home in New York, grappling with terminal stomach cancer. It is not clear whether Theodosia, who died in 1794, knew about her husband’s relationship and children with Emmons, Sherri Burr said.

It seems certain that Louisa Charlotte and her brother knew about their half siblings, though. In the course of her study, Sherri Burr unearthed a letter — kept in Aaron Burr’s personal papers in Philadelphia — that Louisa

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Charlotte sent to Aaron Burr at an unknown date.

“Will you have the goodness to Lend me the Miniature of my beloved Theodosia,” Louisa Charlotte wrote, referring to Aaron Burr’s daughter. She concluded: “With kind remembrance from all the family — believe Me always ... sincere and affectionate.”

That letter is one of several key pieces of evidence that led Sherri Burr and the Aaron Burr Association to believe John Pierre and Louisa Charlotte are indeed Aaron Burr’s children. Another is genetic testing: Using an Ancestry.com kit, Sherri Burr found ties between her DNA and that of Stuart Johnson that can be explained by only a shared descentance from Aaron Burr.

The most compelling proof, however, may be the plot of land in Warwick, N.Y., that Aaron Burr bought and placed in John Pierre’s name so he could build a house, Johnson said. Members of the association unearthed the property deed outlining the transaction a few years ago, Johnson said.

“It’s kind of bizarre that Burr would participate in this if” John Pierre was not his son, Gordon-Reed said. “So that’s pretty powerful.”

Sherri Burr found no evidence that Aaron Burr ever did anything more to recognize his two children with Emmons. Johnson said that, on a copy of John Pierre’s death certificate the association obtained from the city of Philadelphia, the slots for both “Mother” and “Father” are blank.

The Aaron Burr Association, founded in 1946, first became aware of rumors about John Pierre more than a decade ago, when an African American woman named Louella Burr Mitchell Allen came forward claiming to be related to Aaron Burr. The Wall Street Journal reported that Allen, an 86-year-old nurse who passed away a few years later, gave a presentation about her ancestry at the association’s annual meeting in 2005. But her documents and oral history “aren’t conclusive,” the Journal wrote at the time.

It took Sherri Burr’s arrival with stronger proof to spur the group to action.

At Saturday’s ceremony, black and white descendants of Aaron Burr sat crowded under a green tent alongside historians, a pastor and a local politician. They were accompanied by a five-member Color Guard dressed in Revolutionary War uniforms — complete with tan breeches, white gloves and black buckle shoes.

Johnson, Sherri Burr and a handful of others took turns speaking on Aaron Burr’s legacy, John Pierre’s fervent advocacy against slavery and the importance of promoting an unvarnished picture of history.

Johnson and Sherri Burr together raised a black cloth to reveal the shiny new headstone.

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The pistols used in the 1804 duel between Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton are displayed at the National Postal Museum in Washington. (Manuel Balce Ceneta/AP)

“From henceforth I hope John Pierre Burr is never again referred to as ‘the natural son’ or ‘the illegitimate son,’ but is simply referred to as ‘the son,’” Sherri Burr said, spurring applause.

Sherri Burr, who flew to Philadelphia this weekend from her home in New Mexico, shares some of John Pierre’s story in a recent book, “Complicated Lives: Free Blacks in Virginia,

1619-1865.” She is working on a new book, to be called “Aaron Burr’s Family of Color,” that will go into even more detail.



Stuart Johnson, a descendant of Aaron Burr, embraces his newfound relation Sherri Burr, another descendant. DNA testing conducted by Sherri Burr revealed the two are related and helped prove the existence of Aaron Burr’s secret family of color. (Hannah Natanson/The Washington Post)

She particularly hopes to tell more of Louisa Charlotte’s history. Not much is known about her beyond her status as a domestic servant and marriage into the free black community, Sherri Burr said. It’s rumored that Louisa Charlotte lies alongside her brother in the cemetery. If true, the Aaron Burr Association may do something to recognize that, Sherri Burr said.

Meanwhile, she plans to revel over John Pierre finally gaining the commemoration he deserves, Sherri Burr said. And she will continue to wrestle

with conflicting feelings over her newfound relationship to Aaron Burr.

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“Well, for one thing, I think he’s absolutely brilliant, and I am proud of his public service, but,” she paused. “It’s complicated.”

If she ever gets invited to another gathering of Princeton Burrs, Sherri Burr said, she plans to go.