

ing, riding and fishing with young Matthias Ogden, a year his elder, and brother-in-law to Timothy on his wife's side. He, too, was a member of the Edwards' menage. This friendship persisted also in later years, surviving the mutual hardships of the campaign against Quebec, and outlasting the more perilous difficulties of maturity. Aaron Burr had a faculty even in these tender years of attaching warm loyalties to himself.

He did very well in his studies. An uncle, Pierpont Edwards, himself only thirteen, wrote of his small nephew and school-fellow, aged seven. "Aaron Burr is here, is hearty, goes to school, and learns bravely."¹⁵

So well had he learned that at the age of eleven he was positive that he was sufficiently prepared for college. Naturally there was only one place to be considered — Princeton. His whole family fortunes had been bound up in a peculiar degree with the existence of this institution for the breeding of Presbyterian ministers and incidental inculcation in the classical amenities.

He applied, and was refused — much to his disgust and mortification. Not because he was not qualified — the requirements for entrance were lamentably meager — but because of his extreme youth and tiny stature. "Little Burr" he was in youth and "little Burr" he was to remain throughout life. He was a handsome youngster, with small, delicate features inherited from his father, and glowing black eyes that were never to lose their luster even when old and buffeted by fate and the malice of his fellow men.

He went back to Elizabethtown, determined not to be thus unceremoniously cast aside. For two more years he studied at home, following the curriculum of the College faithfully. At the ripe age of thirteen he knocked at the doors of Princeton once again; this time, however, demanding not merely admission, but entrance into the Junior class. For had he not successfully accomplished the required studies for the first two years?

His bold request was rejected, but, because of his special qualifications and his Presidential background, he was graciously permitted to enter — as a Sophomore. This was in 1769. Dr. Witherpoon was President, and the College was still officially known as the College of New-Jersey.

CHAPTER III COLLEGE YEARS

1. THE INSATIABLE STUDENT

PRINCETON was a small village in those days. The College itself consisted of two buildings — Nassau Hall, the nobly proportioned eating, living and intellectual quarters of the students, and the President's home, with whose prospect in the course of construction Esther Burr had been so entirely enamored. Dense forests lay on every side, and other settlements were few and far between. But the New York-Philadelphia stage stopped overnight at the only tavern in the village, and brought regular news of the outside world, and provided a meeting-place where the young students could seek relief from the too chilly dogmas of moral philosophy.

The young boy of thirteen applied himself at once with the utmost diligence to his studies. He devoted from sixteen to eighteen hours of close application to his books. He ate and drank with Spartan abstemiousness, finding that a well-loaded stomach was conducive to mental and physical sluggishness. He was determined to keep up with the others of his class at whatever cost.

But this remarkable regime could not but undermine his constitution and lay the foundation for future disorders. His health gave way. When, however, he discovered at the end of the year that he had exceeded most of his companions in standing, he wisely decided to relax his furious pace. For the remainder of his college career he took his studies in their stride, easily and without the pale, sickly cast of the midnight lamp. Whereupon his health improved and he was able to devote himself to the other recreations that Princeton might afford.

For one thing he joined the literary societies. There were two of them, the American Whig and the Cliosophic, rivals in debate and a somewhat scurrilous paper warfare. He first became a member of the American Whig. With him in that organization were such future notables as James Madison, President of the United States, Philip Freneau, the Revolutionary poet and pamphleteer, Lighthorse Harry Lee, member of the Constitutional Convention, and Hugh Brackenridge, Judge of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court.¹

In 1771, however, for some reason, he quit his associates and joined the rival society, the Cliosophic. According to legend he was one of its founders. But it had been in existence since 1765, when it was known as the Well-Meaning Society. William Patterson, Oliver Ellsworth, Luther Martin, Tapping Reeve and Robert Ogden — all names to conjure with — had been its organizers. It ran afoul of the Faculty and was suppressed in 1768 or 1769. In June of 1770 a group of future clergymen, all seniors, revived the corpse under the name of the Cliosophic Society. Burr joined some six months later.²

With this Society he remained until graduation, and after. His closest friendships — friendships that were to last far into manhood — were conceived and stimulated within the roster of the two societies. William Patterson, Governor of New Jersey, United States Senator and a Justice of the Supreme Court; Matthias Ogden, his boyhood chum, later Colonel and Brigadier General in the Revolutionary Army; Samuel Spring, chaplain of Arnold's expeditionary force and distinguished divine; Luther Martin, the renowned "bulldog of Federalism," who was to come to Burr's aid when Jefferson demanded his life, and who in turn was to be harbored and cherished in a lonely, sodden old age; Henry Brockholst Livingston, New York's Chief Justice and later of the United States Supreme Court; and Jonathan Dayton, Senator from New Jersey, whose fortunes and whose very life were to be intertwined with those of Aaron Burr.

There were others, too, equally distinguished, whose present friendship could not outlast the tides of political importunities and the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Of such were Morgan Lewis, long after to oppose his former comrade for the Governorship of New York, Jonathan Mason, Senator from Massachusetts, who failed him in his hour of bitterest need, and James Madison, who followed Jefferson's political banner into unremitting enmity — and the Presidency of the United States.

A remarkably notable group — these young men of Princeton!

The Cliosophic Society never grew to be ashamed of its famous son. In the darkest of his years, when he was an outcast and all men's hands were turned against him, it delighted to show him honor. In 1812, just returned from his European exile, the Society promptly and somewhat defiantly elected Aaron Burr its President. In 1826 it repeated the gesture. When he died, public mourning was decreed for a period of thirty days and the Society turned out *en masse* to follow the last poor remains to their resting-place.³

2. MYTHS IN THE MAKING

It is from his college days on that the legends begin to cluster thick and furiously around the name of Aaron Burr. Probably of no one else in American history are there more unsupported, and unsupportable, tales in circulation. Some are innocuous; others, superimposed upon the known reserve of his life in those days when his name was already a hissing and a scorn in the mouths of the generalty, were tinctured with retrospective venom. The biographer must perforce tread warily among these fragile tales.

It is recorded that he played at billiards in the tavern and won thereby a certain small sum of money. This, it is said, so shocked the young man's conscience that he forthwith swore off all games of chance for stakes, and held strictly to his resolution through life.⁴ But his Journal, that extraordinary account of his Continental journeyings, records on at least two occasions that he played cards — and for money. Once even, when literally starving, and without a sou in his pocket, he took the desperate chance and emerged "in possession of cash to the amount of 60 sous."⁵

Another legend is not so innocuous. It was the forerunner of a whole battalion of similar tales, all purporting to prove Aaron Burr a rake, a seducer, a scoundrel, a man without morals and without principles, wholly unfit to be invited into any decent man's home. Though, on analysis, not one of these infamous stories has emerged intact, yet a good deal of the spattering mire has managed to cling to his name down to this very day, with results that are obvious to the most casual observer.

This earliest *canard* was the touching story of the Lonely Grave. Catherine Bullock, so it went, a young lady of Princeton, was basely seduced by young Burr and as callously abandoned. In despair she committed suicide, and, as an eternal reproach to her betrayer, her outcast body was buried on the site of President Burr's house, where it still reposes in solitary judgment.

The facts, however, are quite at variance with this dark tale of passion and tragedy. She, it seems, was the niece of Colonel George Morgan, at whose home she was visiting from Philadelphia in a vain attempt to be cured of a tubercular condition. She died undramatically and quite correctly of that disease in the year, marked on her gravestone for all to see, 1792. Aaron Burr graduated from Princeton in 1772, just twenty years before. Actually, the "lonely grave" had been cut off from its respectable mates in the old Morgan burial-ground by the prosaic interposition of

a new highway. Nor was the site ever the place of the house of President Burr.⁶

Of Aaron Burr's college compositions, several have been preserved for posterity, but they prove to be but the usual academic effusions on set topics that are always the delight of professors and the despair of students. Consider the subject matter. An Essay on Style, in which the youthful essayist condemns the "laboured ornaments of language, the round period, or the studied epithet," and justly, if platitudinously, proclaims that "there never was a ready speaker, whose language was not, generally, plain and simple."⁷ He wrote also on Honor, on the Passions, on An Attempt to Search the Origin of Idolatry, and on Dancing. No sign anywhere of the literary art or the authentic fire. But then Burr was never to blossom into the literary life!

In his junior year he won first prize for "reading the English language with propriety, and answering questions on Orthography," and second prize for "reading the Latin and Greek languages with propriety."⁸

3. THE STUDENTS GET RELIGION

In Burr's last year at college there occurred one of those periodic frenzies known as "revivals" in which his father, the Reverend Mr. Burr, and his grandfather, the Reverend Mr. Edwards, had rejoiced so heartily. All regular business of the college was suspended, and students and professors alike wallowed in the emotional orgy. A large number hit the sawdust trail, and looked askance at young Burr when he held aloof. He was urged to remember his father, his mother, his grandfather, the entire ministerial line of Burrs and Edwards. Somewhat shaken in his intellectual skepticism by the continual exhortations — remember he was but a lad of fifteen at the time — he consulted in some perplexity the President of the College, Dr. Witherspoon. That canny Scotchman, whose practical good sense was opposed to revivals, though not daring openly to interfere, advised him against plunging into the emotional maelstrom. The raging excitement, he told the young applicant, was purely fanatical, without contacts in true religion. Whereupon Aaron felt relieved, and, thus fortified, was able to resist the call of the herd.⁹

Already, as a mere lad, Burr was conducting a goodly part of his correspondence in cipher; that practice which was to be maintained through life and was destined to contribute not a little to the tremendous popular clamor against him when the

great "Conspiracy" unfolded. Always has this trait of secrecy and *sub rosa* concealments been held against Burr as pointing to certain dark and twisted convolutions in his being from which anything might be expected. But a little sane reflection should set the matter in its proper frame.

In the beginning, the practice of cipher writing may have been what has been normal to childhood in all ages. Though his friend, William Patterson, warned him almost immediately after graduation, that "the New-England people, I am told, are odd, inquisitive kind of beings, and, when pricked on by foolish curiosity, may perhaps open the letter, which I do not choose should be common to every eye."¹⁰

To a politician, however, or to any one who did not desire his mail to become public property, a cipher in that day and age was a practical necessity. The mails were not sacrosanct, the means of transportation crude, and, as Patterson pointed out, the people — elsewhere as well as in New England — curious. Ciphers were in common use among important men, just as code telegrams are universally used in business today. Time and again men like Washington and Jefferson interrupt their letters with the remark that they dare not entrust more to the insecurity of the mails, but must await a safer moment for further communication.

The students of Princeton were not exactly pampered. They were not permitted a free use of funds with which to indulge in worldly pleasures when their minds should be engrossed with the lovely symmetries of syntax and the noble proportions of ethical principles. Their spending money, given by doting parents or sterner guardians, was required to be deposited with the Treasurer of the College, and doled out by him to the necessitous student in such manner as not to cast undue temptation in his path.

When Aaron, for example, wished to visit in Philadelphia, he sent an humble chit to the purse-bearing Treasurer requesting a modest 4.10, which was happily granted.¹¹ But when, on the eve of graduation, he wrote, "As the Class are to be examined the Beginning of next week and I shall be obliged to spend a considerable sum I shall be much obliged to you if you will send me by the bearer George what you think fit," he committed a tactical error, for the Treasurer saw "fit" to send him the generous sum of four dollars!¹²

4. GRADUATION

He graduated from Princeton in September, 1772. His record was good but not outstanding. Another of those nameless legends has it that he graduated at the head of his class with a rating that has never been surpassed in the history of the university. There is not the slightest basis for this. As a matter of fact, while his exact standing is not known, he ranked neither first, second nor third in the class. He did not deliver the Latin Salutatory nor the Valedictory. Much is made of his honorary oration, entitled, ironically enough in view of certain phases of his later career, "Castle Building." But in those days of small graduating classes practically every graduate orated on Commencement Day.¹³

William Patterson, writing to their mutual friend, the Reverend Dr. Samuel Spring, already graduated and in orders, remarked that "the young gentlemen went through their exercises in a manner passable enough. The speakers were all tolerable — none of them very bad nor very good. Our young friend Burr made a gracefull appearance; he was excelled by none, except perhaps by Bradford."¹⁴ Burr never was to blossom into the orotund type of oratory to which Commencement orations are peculiarly adapted. His talents lay in the direction of precision, cogency, and the swift marshaling of facts.

Patterson, as a matter of fact, had already advised young Burr on the subject. Said he: "Forbear with me while I say *that you cannot speak too slow*. Your good judgment generally leads you to lay emphasis on the most forcible word in the sentence; so far you act very right. But the misfortune is, that you lay too great stress upon the emphatical word. Every word should be distinctly pronounced; one should not be so highly sounded as to drown another."¹⁵

It was over; the tumult and the shouting and the fervent good-byes. He was sixteen, precocious, young, small even for his age, a graceful, handsome lad, who already had attached male friends to himself and was beginning to flutter the feminine dovescotes. The world was before him.

But his guardian's good sense and his own desires declared in favor of delaying the plunge. Accordingly, Burr remained at Princeton after graduation for some months, reading extensively, laying the foundation for that love of books and searching inquiry that were to distinguish him throughout life, and withal amusing himself in a fashion not incongruous with his age, his looks and

general disposition. He alternated between Princeton and Elizabethtown, where young Matthias Ogden, his best friend, joined him in boating, sailing the Kill van Kull, and in certain other adventures of which friend Patterson, more staid and accustomed to the cloistered air of Princeton, hinted in oblique phrases. "Our mutual friend, Stewart," he chides, "informed me you were still at Elizabethtown. You are much fonder of that place than I am, otherwise you would hardly be prevailed upon to make so long a stay. But, perhaps, the reason that I fear it, makes you like it. There is certainly something amorous in its very air."¹⁶

5. THE FOOTSTEPS OF HIS FATHERS

In such wise the summer of 1773 slipped by. With the coming of a sterner season, more serious thoughts intruded. It was time now to consider the future, the making of a career. As far as Timothy Edwards, his guardian, was concerned, the matter was settled. Nor did any other thought enter the heads of the whole tribe of Edwards, the more distantly related Burrs, the Faculty of Princeton, or of his numerous friends.

Aaron Burr was to become a minister of the gospel. His ancestry, his education, his upbringing, tradition, all imperiously demanded it. Already, back in May of 1772, while he was still a Senior in College, Samuel Spring, in the first flush of divinity studies, had hoped "to see the time when you will feel it to be your duty to go into the same study with a desire for the ministry. Remember, that was the prayer of your dear father and mother, and is the prayer of your friends to this time."¹⁷

It was hard for a lad of seventeen to oppose the expressed desires of those he respected and loved, and the even more crushing, if invisible, influences of form and tradition. There are no evidences that at any time he had been deeply religious, or possessed of the emotional, ecstatic nature of his immediate forbears. Such traits were foreign to his cool, analytical mind and reserved habits. His resistance to the pressure of the mob in the revival at Princeton had proved that.

Furthermore, he had read extensively, and seemingly a good part of that browsing had been done in books that were tinged with the spirit of skepticism and inquiry emanating thus early from the cosmopolites of France. A faint shudder of disgust must have passed over him at the thought of himself in decent black.

Nevertheless he trod for the moment the well-worn path of duty and conformity. He would at least give the matter a trial. So he repaired to the home of Dr. Joseph Bellamy, at Bethlehem, Connecticut, for instruction and guidance into the sacrosanct mysteries of the Presbyterian theology. The good Dr. Bellamy had been an apt pupil of Jonathan Edwards, and was himself by now a famous preacher and even more famous inductor into the ministry. His home had gradually assumed the proportions, if not the dignity, of a theological seminary.

He was pleased to receive Aaron into the bosom of his family in the autumn of 1773. Nor was Timothy Edwards, who had not long before closed his house in Elizabethtown and moved back to Stockbridge, less satisfied. His young ward must have sorely puzzled and perturbed the reverend gentleman; he had frankly given up all thoughts of restraint for a considerable period. But now, evidently, things were shaping up quite well.

It took Aaron Burr only a little while, however, to discover that the pursuit of chaste theology was not for him. The worthy doctor was an honorable, if somewhat indiscreet, instructor. He liked to employ the Socratic method for the purpose of testing the validities of the Calvinist dogma. This was a dangerous procedure with a lad of Burr's stamp. The theologian was evidently no match for his keen-witted pupil, whose weapons of debate had been tempered in the fires of the French philosophers, for soon Burr was writing with youthful exuberance to Matthias Ogden that he had Dr. Bellamy "completely under [his] thumb."¹⁸

Exuberance soon passed, however, and gave way to calmer and more considered reflections. The narrow path of Presbyterianism, the repressions preached by its great exemplars, the eradication of so much of life and humanity in the process, repelled him on this closer examination. "The road to heaven," he was convinced, "was open to all alike."¹⁹ The keys were not irrevocably given to any one set of dogmas. Accordingly, and with mutual protestations of good will, he quit his mentor in the early summer of 1774.

Religion thereafter became for him a purely personal and private affair, not to be discussed in public or to be the subject of argument. He has been accused time and again of being an atheist. Perhaps he was — there is no manner of telling. Certainly his life was not put into the mold of any revealed gospel, nor was it at any time guided by the hope of rewards or fear of punishments in a hereafter. It is true that he attended a fashionable



Courtesy of Princeton University

REVEREND AARON BURR



Courtesy of Estate of Dr. John E. Stillwell

AARON BURR, IN YOUTH

From a portrait by Gilbert Stuart

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church in New York in afteryears, but that doubtless was a formal concession to the requirements of the time.²⁰

It is probable, however, that he was a Deist, in the sense that Jefferson and Franklin were. It was a vague, comfortable phrase that could cover a great deal of inner skepticism. Surprisingly, the important figures of that period were not much given to prayer and religious observances. The old Gods had changed; new ones were taking their place.

6. IDYLIC INTERLUDE

Burr's thoughts, now that the ministry had been definitely set aside, turned to law. This was the other great profession to which young men of good family and education inevitably tended. And it possessed certain characteristics that must have appealed quite strongly to his particular cast of mind.

The question arose, however, as to his tutelage in the intricacies of Blackstone and Coke. Pierpont Edwards or Tapping Reeve? Both good lawyers and both relatives. His guardian, Timothy, to whom he applied for advice, was grimly resigned. The decision of his obstreperous ward had been a blow to him. It was, he answered coldly, "a matter of indifference to me. I would have you act your pleasure therein."²¹

Left thus abruptly to his own devices, Burr chose Tapping Reeve. There were additional attractions at Litchfield besides the tutorial capacity of his brother-in-law. Sally Reeve, for instance, his well-beloved sister. The country, moreover, was pleasant; the young ladies numerous and quite pretty. Summer was just beginning, the sap was rising, and young spirits grew animated in anticipation. It was obviously no time to commence hard and serious work among the crabbed citations of the legists. Time enough for that in the sear of autumn.

But somehow when autumn came he still dallied. For he was feeling his oats, and the process seemed good. In short, he was eighteen! The winter passed, and the spring of 1775. All through the period he conducted a gay, lively correspondence from Litchfield with his friend Ogden in Elizabethtown. It was replete with much high-spirited nonsense and numerous allusions to casual love intrigues. There was an exchange of letters, conceived in anonymity, with a certain young lady, and couched in a phraseology at once sentimental and lofty. Ogden wrote of rumors in Princeton that Aaron had finally fixed his attentions on a single girl. To which Burr retorted that no two of the gossipers could

agree on the same girl as the recipient of his favors. Then there was much laughter to be made out of Uncle Thaddeus Burr's transparent attempts to inveigle Aaron into matrimony with a young lady of fortune. Steady Matthias, himself engaged to be married, and fearing that the machinations of Uncle Thaddeus might finally involve his friend, breathed solemn warning against the proposed marriage with money unless "Love" and "Soul" were likewise involved.²²

An idyllic interlude! The outer world seemed completely forgotten in this interchange of youthful exuberances and preoccupations with the lovely face of the youthful god, Eros. Yet that outer world was in a turmoil. The Colonies seethed with discontent and most articulate rage. There had been Navigation Acts and Stamp Acts, Committees of Correspondence and boycotts; Samuel Adams ranged up and down the land inculcating radical ideas and more radical actions; there had been a Boston Massacre and a Boston Tea Party. Events were marching with inexorable tread toward a definite, already visible goal.

It must not be assumed from the evidence of this correspondence alone that the vast issues which embroiled their fellow men left these dallying youngsters untouched. Aaron Burr never, at any period of his life, was to commit his profoundest thoughts or inner emotions to paper. His character, for all his outward fluency, was too essentially reserved, too chary of the power of the printed word, to place himself down thus irrevocably. This it is that makes the task of Aaron Burr's biographer such a blind groping in the dark. The *facts* of his life are there for all to read, but more often than not they are double-edged, susceptible of infinite doubt, because he left no clues to the inner motivations, the hidden springs which animated him; such clues as are ordinarily to be found in the unguarded or confidential letters of others. •

One letter only of this period betrays an awareness of the parlous state of the times and a very definite insight into Burr's personal reactions. By August of 1774 passions had raised to such a pitch that a Barrington mob attacked and demolished the house of a man suspected of Toryism. The sheriff arrested eight of the ringleaders "*without resistance*," and brought them on to Litchfield for safekeeping. The next day fifty horsemen, armed with clubs, rode into town to rescue the prisoners. Burr sallied forth to join in the prospective fray, but, to his vast disgust, the attempt was not made, and, crowning infamy, "the above mentioned *sneaks all gave bonds for their appearance*, to stand a trial at

the next court for committing a riot." ²³ The young amorist was rapidly becoming a fire-eater!

He was beginning also to apply himself to the study of the law. It was high time! But his progress was rudely interrupted by the sound of guns at Lexington. The War of the Revolution had commenced!