

**SOME PAPERS  
OF AARON BURR**

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Some Papers of Aaron Burr by Worthington C. Ford

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**WORTHINGTON C. FORD**

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**American Antiquarian Society**

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## SOME PAPERS OF AARON BURR

BY WORTHINGTON CHAUNCY FORD

The history of this collection of some ninety letters is this. Matthew L. Davis, for many years the friend and trusted adviser of Burr, to whom he left his papers in order that a memoir—a euphemism for a defence—might be prepared, in 1839 gave to Mrs. John Davis of Massachusetts, at her request, some “autographs” selected from the Burr papers. An autograph may be an historical paper, but usually it is not. The autograph hunter is contented to possess a signature, a legal document with seal and signature, or a portion of a letter cut or torn from its context, although in the process the ruin of a fine historical paper might be caused. What the Grangerizer is to books the autograph hunter is to manuscripts—a pest to be educated out of his destructive courses or to be restrained from access to collections of papers. Davis, judging by his compilation, had no just idea of the value or relation of what had been entrusted to him. The name at the foot of the writing he judged according to the popular conception of individuals in history entertained in 1839, and that conception was wholly wrong. There were as many collectors of hair, last words, buttons, and buckles as of historical papers, and a letter of Washington had no more value than a letter of one of his generals or aides—which was no value at all. So limited was the market for such objects, so easily satisfied, and so little the discrimination of so-called collectors that the best of family records suffered by attrition, and years after Davis so light-heartedly drew on the Burr bequest to gratify the caprice of a namesake, Jared Sparks could distribute on request a state paper of Washington leaf by leaf. It was as

intelligent and praiseworthy as a mutual distribution of photographs—a later fancy which somewhat relieved the growing pressure for autographs.

If it is assumed that Davis had no true idea of what a manuscript should be, valuable for its content—and nowhere has he given evidence of possessing such an idea—then the righteous indignation of every student of the Burr period is fittingly directed against him. To dip casually into a collection and select almost accidentally a few papers would be a procedure to shame a modern investigator. Like the haruspex of old he must most carefully examine the entrails of the victim to determine the course of fate. Only on a careful search can the best of a collection be found. What must have been the Burr papers if any judgment can be based on the haphazard selection of these autographs! Name some of these pieces: the letter of Roger Sherman announcing the appointment by Congress of general officers in the Continental army in 1775, with the reasons; an important letter from General Schuyler to General Montgomery (1775), letters from Charles Lee, Chase and Carroll, Lincoln, Hull and Duer to General Wooster; an address in French to the inhabitants of Quebec signed by Benedict Arnold, enjoining them to accept the paper bills of credit of the Continental Congress; a holograph letter of Israel Putnam to Margaret Moncrieffe, and Putnam's letters are so few in number as to be a most sought acquisition, and in them the spelling is according to Putnam not to Johnson—or anywhere near it; a long letter on military matters from Alexander Macdougall and a short note from James Rivington—was he a tory or a good rebel, or both? another from James Wilkinson—is there any doubt as to what he was or deserved? a letter from Gallatin and a few lines from Hamilton; political sheets from Caesar A. Rodney, Thomas Jefferson, Jonathan Russell, Isaiah Bloomfield, Alexander J. Dallas, Willett, Thomas Truxtun, John Taylor of Caroline; a fine letter from



Luther Martin to Joseph Alston on Burr's imprisonment in Richmond, and examples of Theodosia and her husband, of the Prevosts and of Burr himself. If such are sample pieces, what must the whole Burr collection have been? Did it contain the papers of the unfortunate—yet fortunate General Wooster, who did not live to meet certain defeat? Did it contain the records of that rash and ill-considered expedition of 1775-76 to Canada? The sense of indignation against Davis increases as each piece is noted. How account for his criminal carelessness in permitting such a collection to be lost? It was a crime against Burr, his friend and benefactor, and it was a crime against posterity. The incident gives a proper measure of Matthew L. Davis.<sup>1</sup> Fortunately the Ms. of Burr's Journal, when in Europe, 1808-1810, escaped destruction and has been adequately printed by the generous interest of Mr. William K. Bixby, of St. Louis. The Burr papers as they were can only be fancied from the few samples that have survived. This volume made up for Mrs. John Davis thus becomes precious, for it is more characteristic of Burr than any I have met, yet, I insist, the selection must have been accidental.

In another way these letters form an indictment against Davis and all his kind. He took unpardonable liberties with the text of some which he did print. I have in another place<sup>2</sup> tried to show the gradual development of the editorial function, so largely a matter of conscience, and free speech, and need not again specify the various sins which were in favor when Davis too successfully edited his trust into nothingness. He was guilty of all of them. Whatever was thought of Burr in his public and in his private relations—and the opinion held of him in the nine-

<sup>1</sup>In none of the biographical dictionaries is his middle name spelled out and he is invariably referred to as Matthew L. Davis. Mr. A. J. Wall of the N. Y. Historical Society, in answering a letter of inquiry on the subject, finds that his name was Matthew Livingston Davis, that he was born Oct. 28, 1773, the son of Matthew Davis and Phebe Wells, and that he was buried in Trinity Church cemetery.

<sup>2</sup>American Historical Review, XXIII, 278.

teenth century was quite impressively unanimous—was due to Davis, described as his sole friend for a almost a generation. The worst breach of trust is that which involves the reputation of a benefactor, of one who has bestowed favors and consideration with or without selfish purpose. Burr did not live or die in the odor of sanctity—he could not, in spite of the accumulated credit of his ancestry, in spite of much in extenuation he could himself have supplied. But the bad odor which contemporary conditions aggravated might have been partially deodorized by a judicious statement of truth, for which, from his point of view, the papers left by Burr would have been ample.

Of this responsibility Davis had not the slightest consciousness. With his friend's repute solemnly entrusted to him he went out of his way to destroy it. The deliberate stab which was as needless as it was fatal, is contained in Davis' introduction and again in the text of the *Memoirs*,<sup>3</sup> where the morals of Burr were blackened beyond recovery. The opening given to explain or even to excuse his public career was as deliberately neglected. Burr, the man, was stripped naked for public exposure, and this was done by the one person whom he had long known, favored and looked upon as his defender to be. Even royalty cannot stand such a test. "The generality of princes," says Gibbon, and it is as true now as 1600 years ago, "if they were stripped of their purple and cast naked into the world, would immediately sink to the lowest rank of society, without a hope of emerging from their obscurity."<sup>4</sup> We are asked to believe that Davis was a creditable correspondent of the New York "Courier and Enquirer" and of the London "Times." Such an experience should have developed a journalistic habit useful in biography, a sense of what is important, or striking, or informing. In fact he took a diamond

<sup>3</sup>*Memoirs*, I. 91, 181.

<sup>4</sup>Gibbon, *Decline and Fall* (Milman ed.), III. 133.

and reduced it to paste. He blabbed and destroyed the evidence. Could there be greater or more cowardly disloyalty?

If this journalist, of whose merits so low an opinion must be formed, was responsible for the quite uncalled for exposure of Burr's personal weaknesses, another journalist sought to remedy the fault. James Parton, was, in my early days, somewhat unjustly described as the "great American romancer." Imagination is a desirable quality in biography, especially where the writer is "short" of knowledge or material and a little "long" on temperament. The most successful bit of biographical writing in America was Weems' Washington, which savors of qualities to be found in a mediæval romance of knighthood or of sainthood. What Weems was in little Parton was in large, and his relations are picturesque, highly colored and keenly journalistic—still not unreadable and quite misleading. He was incapable of sounding the depths of character, of analyzing motives and following the turnings of that self-deception which so largely constitutes political life. His Burr is a more winning personality and a more important actor in the drama of history than the Burr of Davis; but in seeking to accomplish this result he so disposed the lights and shadows as to produce a picture which was not a portrait. Even his industry could not manufacture the necessary material, and his use of what he had is often open to question. It should also be remembered that the Burr was Parton's second attempt at biography and his first on a national scale. For Horace Greeley before 1855 was not a figure to be evoked from its partial obscurity except by an aspiring journalist.\* Generally speaking for a newspaper man to write of a living master journalist smacks of the biography condemned by the description of a "campaign biography." Parton's Burr was a great improvement on

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\*Parton's *Life of Greeley* appeared in 1855; his *Burr* in 1858.