

Title: “An Honorable Death?”

Grade Levels: 9-12

Time Allotment: Two to three 45-minute class periods

Overview:

This high school lesson plan uses video segments excerpted from ***Rediscovering Alexander Hamilton*** to explore the dispute of honor between Alexander Hamilton and then-Vice president Aaron Burr which led to the former’s death and the latter’s disgrace.

The Introductory Activity tests students’ prior knowledge of dueling and establishes the broad historical parameters of dueling as a way for high-status gentlemen to settle disputes. The Learning Activities use video segments from ***Rediscovering Alexander Hamilton*** to explore the nature of Hamilton and Burr’s relationship, the rules of dueling outlined in the “Code Duello,” and the circumstances of the duel itself, which left Hamilton dead and Burr disgraced. It also suggests parallels between adherents to the Code Duello and the modern day gang members fighting to defend their honor. The Culminating Activity challenges students to create their own non-violent, extra-legal “code” for resolving disputes honorably.

This lesson is best used during or following a unit on Alexander Hamilton and/or the Founding Fathers.

Subject Matter: History

Learning Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- Distinguish dueling from brawling, fighting, or murder
- Compare and contrast the meaning and significance of honor in the 19th century and in our own time
- Define the Code Duello and describe its purpose
- Explain what appeal illegal dueling had over courts of law to individuals like Hamilton and Burr
- Find parallels between 19th century American aristocracy and 21st century gangs

Learning Standards:

United States History Content Standards for Grades 5 -12

(from the National Center for History in the Schools at

<http://www.nchs.ucla.edu/Standards/us-history-content-standards>)

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Historical Thinking Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation

The student engages in historical analysis and interpretation: Therefore, the student is able to:

- Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas, values, personalities, behaviors, and institutions by identifying likenesses and differences.
- Consider multiple perspectives of various peoples in the past by demonstrating their differing motives, beliefs, interests, hopes, and fears.
- Analyze cause-and-effect relationships bearing in mind multiple causation including (a) the importance of the individual in history; (b) the influence of ideas, human interests, and beliefs; and (c) the role of chance, the accidental and the irrational.
- Draw comparisons across eras and regions in order to define enduring issues as well as large-scale or long-term developments that transcend regional and temporal boundaries.
- Distinguish between unsupported expressions of opinion and informed hypotheses grounded in historical evidence.
- Compare competing historical narratives.
- Challenge arguments of historical inevitability by formulating examples of historical contingency, of how different choices could have led to different consequences.
- Hold interpretations of history as tentative, subject to changes as new information is uncovered, new voices heard, and new interpretations broached.
- Evaluate major debates among historians concerning alternative interpretations of the past.
- Hypothesize the influence of the past, including both the limitations and opportunities made possible by past decisions.

MEDIA COMPONENTS:

Video:

From *Rediscovering Alexander Hamilton*:

- **Burr's Beef**
Explores the controversy surrounding the origins of the personal dispute between Hamilton and Burr which led to their duel.
- **The Duel**
Features a reenactment of the Hamilton/ Burr duel staged on the actual site between descendants of both men.

Websites:

“The Code Duello”

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/duel/sfeature/rulesofdueling.html>

An educational PBS website featuring a transcript of the official 1777 “rules of dueling” adhered to by Hamilton and Burr.

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Materials:

For the teacher:

- A computer with internet access connected to a projector and speakers for classroom use.

PREP FOR TEACHERS

Prior to teaching this lesson, you will need to:

Preview all of the video segments and websites used in the lesson.

Download the video segments used in the lesson to your classroom computer, or prepare to watch them using your classroom's internet connection.

Bookmark the website used in the lesson on each computer in your classroom. Using a social bookmarking tool such as delicious.com or diigo (or an online bookmarking utility such as portaportal) will allow you to organize all the links in a central location.

INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITY

1. Ask students what they think a duel is? (*Answers will vary, but explain that the simplest traditional definition is a formal confrontation between two individuals.*) What are some famous types of duels that they can think of, either real or fictional? (*Answers will vary, but may include western gunfights, Star Wars light saber duels, fighter aces dogfighting, and knights jousting on horseback.*) What distinguishes a duel from a simple fight or brawl, or even murder? (*Accept all answers, but explain that duels are generally considered to be contests of honor between two individuals who have at least some measure of respect for each other.*)
2. Ask what the basis of that respect might be? (*Accept all answers, but explain that while respect between duelers might be based on mutual ability—similar to one-on-one sports matches—historically, the more frequently and fundamental shared quality between duelers was social status and/or class.*) Ask students from which class they think duelers most often came, historically? (*Accept all answers, but explain that it was among the “gentlemen” of the aristocracy and upper classes that dueling was historically most popular.*) Ask students what they think these gentlemen were dueling about? (*Accept all answers, but explain that duels were most often the result of real or perceived affronts to one or both men's honor.*)
3. Ask students to define honor. (*Accept all answers.*) Explain that in our own context, honor is widely viewed in the as a positive attribute, similar to integrity, residing in the individual; in other words, it is a code of behavior that individuals impose on themselves. A more traditional definition of honor, however, places a much greater role on the individual's larger community, and its judgment of his or her worth in society; in other words, it is a code of behavior imposed on individuals by their peers. Ask students if they can think of another word that describes honor when defined socially in this way. (*Reputation.*) Explain that in this lesson, the class will be exploring the concept of honor

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and its traditional “satisfaction” through deadly duels by examining the most famous duel in American history—that fought between Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr in 1804.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

1. Ask the class what they know about Alexander Hamilton’s life and accomplishments (*Answers will vary, but should include that after serving in the Continental Army in the American Revolution, Hamilton went on to become one of the principle architects of the Constitution and the first Secretary of the Treasury.*) Ask if anyone knows how he died. (*He was killed in a duel by his political rival, Vice-President Aaron Burr.*) Frame the first video clip by explaining that it explores the root causes of Hamilton’s duel with Aaron Burr. Provide a focus for students by asking whether Burr had had a previous political dispute with Hamilton. **PLAY clip 1: “Burr’s Beef.”**

2. Review the focus question: Had Burr had a previous political dispute with Hamilton? (*Yes. Hamilton had used his influence to sway the House of Representatives to break the presidential electoral tie between Burr and Jefferson in the latter’s favor.*) Ask students if they think Burr would have considered Hamilton’s lobbying against him in the presidential election to be an affront to his honor? (*Accept all answers, but explain that the political wasn’t considered personal; in fact, Hamilton considered himself on much better personal terms with Burr than with his traditional adversary Thomas Jefferson.*) Ask students if, given this history of political enmity between Hamilton and Burr, they think negative comments about one from the other might simply be expected and accepted as part of their public lives as prominently opposed politicians? (*Accept all answers, but explain that Burr himself noted that “political opposition can never absolve gentlemen from the necessity of a rigid adherence to the laws of honor and the rules of decorum.”*) Ask students if they think modern politicians adhere to these “laws of honor and rules of decorum.” (*Accept all answers.*)

3. Ask what the real reason for Burr’s offense was. (*Hamilton was reputed to have said something “despicable” about Burr at a dinner party; novelist Gore Vidal has speculated that this might have been an allusion to Burr’s unusually close relationship with his daughter, although the truth is unknown.*) Explain that in response, Burr had demanded: “a prompt and unqualified acknowledgment or denial of...[the] expression.” Hamilton replied through a third party that he

“cannot recollect distinctly the particulars of that conversation...but to the best of his recollection it consisted of comments on the political principles and views of Colonel Burr...without reference to any particular instance of past conduct or private character.”

4. Ask students if they think this carefully-worded statement from Hamilton constitutes an apology. (*No.*) Ask students what they think Hamilton was attempting to accomplish with the statement. (*Hamilton appears to be trying to defuse the situation without actually acknowledging the purported remarks, let alone apologizing for them.*) Ask if students think Burr could have accepted Hamilton’s statement and walked away with both men’s honor intact. (*Accept all answers.*) If yes, why didn’t he? (*Accept all answers, but point out that, as Burr’s descendent Antonio Burr suggested in the video **Rediscovering Alexander Hamilton** is a production of Manifold Productions, Inc., in association with WNET/Thirteen in New York City. Funding for **Rediscovering Alexander Hamilton** was provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities, BNY Mellon, the John Templeton Foundation, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Roger and Susan Hertog, the Robert H. Smith Family Foundation, The Lynde & Harry Bradley Foundation, and the Gilder Foundation.*

clip, Burr may simply have had enough of Hamilton's persistent attacks—both political and personal—and may have actively desired a duel to settle the matter once and for all.)

5. Ask students if they think these real and/or purported actions of Hamilton's justified Burr's outrage? (*Accept all answers.*) Ask students how writer Gore Vidal described both men in the clip. (*As physically small men with large egos—basically suffering from what would later be known as "Napoleon complexes."*) Explain that this is to some extent speculation on Vidal's behalf, but there is no doubt among historians that both men had highly developed and easily bruised egos. Ask if it seems strange that such a heated dispute could arise over unspecified and unconfirmed comments? (*Accept all answers.*) Ask students if they think that the actual words uttered may have been less important than their perceived intention to defame. (*Accept all answers, but suggest that while Burr clearly felt his reputation had been significantly besmirched by Hamilton's remarks, the traditional code of honor both men observed was somewhat abstract—less about the particulars than the principle of the offense.*) Was this a proper justification for dueling? (*Accept all answers.*)

6. Ask students if they think this "honor" system seems like a very effective means of settling disputes? (*Accept all answers.*) How might we attempt to settle such a dispute today? (*In court.*) If it had gone to court, what would Burr's charge against Hamilton have been? (*Slander, which is defined as defamation by oral utterance rather than by writing.*) Explain that the courts were, even in Hamilton and Burr's time, the officially sanctioned method of redressing grievances; dueling was illegal in most of the nation, including both men's state of New York. Ask students why they think Burr chose not to defend his honor in court; what appeal might dueling have had over a legal case? (*Answers will vary. Encourage an understanding of that courts are not essentially arenas of honor, but rather of evidence, in which the final decision is imposed by a third party—a judge or a jury—as opposed to being decided by the concerned gentlemen themselves. Moreover, the element of physical danger and personal courage in a duel is a central part of the practice's appeal: a dueler is literally standing up for himself, facing his enemy directly, with no mediation by judge, juries, or laws. Finally, the very fact that dueling itself was illegal may have contributed to its appeal among powerful men like Hamilton and Burr, who considered themselves adherents of a gentlemanly code of honor above and beyond the "common law" intended for most people.*)

7. Ask students if they think the practice of dueling was unique to Hamilton and Burr's era. (*No.*) Explain that dueling had existed among European gentlemen for centuries before 1804, and that as the 19th century progressed, it would attain mythological status in a different and uniquely American context. Ask students if they know what that context was? (*The Old West.*) Provide a focus for the next portion of the video clip by asking what it is specifically that compels Burr to challenge Hamilton to a duel. RESUME playing Clip 1.

8. PAUSE the clip at 1:35:55, after the gunfighter shoots his opponent. Review the focus question: what is it specifically that compels Burr to challenge Hamilton to a duel? (*The Code Duello.*) Log on to "The Code Duello" website (at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/duel/sfeature/rulesofdueling.html>) and explain that it presents a version of dueling rules codified in 1777 by Irish gentlemen and widely adopted in England and America. Briefly scroll through the Code's 25 rules, and ask **Rediscovering Alexander Hamilton** is a production of Manifold Productions, Inc., in association with WNET/Thirteen in New York City. Funding for **Rediscovering Alexander Hamilton** was provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities, BNY Mellon, the John Templeton Foundation, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Roger and Susan Hertog, the Robert H. Smith Family Foundation, The Lynde & Harry Bradley Foundation, and the Gilder Foundation.

students for their general impression of the document. (*Answers will vary but should include surprise at how detailed it is.*) Ask students why they think the act of two men trying to kill each other should require such detailed rules. (*Accept all answers.*) Direct students' attention to Rule 15, and ask what it suggests about the Code Duello more generally. (*Rule 15 specifically prohibits the delivery of dueling challenges at night in order to "avoid all hot-headed proceedings"; this suggests that at least part of the Code's purpose is to prevent unnecessary bloodshed.*) Explain that despite essentially being a manual of how to honorably kill someone, the Code Duello is in fact full of subtle provisions and loopholes at various stages allowing one or both duelers to withdraw honorably or at least avoid killing each other.

9. Ask students if the western gunfight portrayed in the video clip adheres to the Code Duello? (*No.*) Why not? (*The insult immediately provoked a "hot-headed" gunfight, with no opportunity for apologies or explanation, and no provision for a fair duel.*) Explain that the traditional image of the western "quickdraw" gunfight, with two gunslingers squaring off on a street as depicted in the last video excerpt, is largely mythical. Ask students if they think that actual western gunmen observed the Code Duello. (*Accept all answers, but suggest that the Code Duello was conceived and primarily adhered to by gentlemen of high birth or status—a description which rarely described the more rough and tumble gunmen of the Old West.*)

10. Ask students if the Code Duello is particularly influential in our culture today? (*No.*) Why? (*Accept all answers before suggesting that the Code Duello was considered arcane and anachronistic even in Hamilton's and Burr's day—hence its illegality—and the delicate sense of "old world" gentlemanly honor upon which it is based has not endured in modern American culture.*) Ask students if the image of the western gunfight—mythical or not—has been influential on our culture today. (*Yes.*) Why? (*Accept all answers before suggesting that American popular culture is filled with portrayals of rough vigilante justice, and that the notion of fighting for one's honor or reputation outside the strict confines of the law is a popular theme.*) Does this phenomenon exist in real life as well as movies and television? If so, where? (*Yes—particularly among urban gangs.*) Provide a focus for the remainder of the clip by asking students what the differences are between what offended Burr and what offends the present-day gang members interviewed in the video. RESUME playing Clip 1 through to the end.

11. Review the focus question: what are the differences between what offended Burr and what offends these present-day gang members? (*Burr was offended by what he considered to be "despicable" remarks by Hamilton; the gang members find such descriptions ridiculously antiquated, but consider calling someone a "bitch" to be the highest offense.*) What is the real difference between these two insults? (*Encourage an understanding that while the language and the cultural contexts are different, the essential meaning in both cases is profound disrespect, justifying violence in the name of honor and reputation.*)

12. Frame the next clip by telling students that it retraces Hamilton's final journey across the Hudson River to face Burr in Weehawken, New Jersey, where illegal dueling was prosecuted less vigorously than in New York. Provide a focus question by asking what the formal procedure was for a duel, as presented in the clip. PLAY Clip 2: "The Duel."

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13. Review the focus question: what were the formal steps for having a duel, as presented in the video? (*First, the “line” is marked by counting off ten paces; next, lots are cast to determine who gets to choose their position; third, the dueler who had not provided the pistols takes his choice of pistol; finally, the commands of “ready” and “present” are given, after which both men may fire.*) Ask a volunteer to come to the front of the room and mark off ten paces (approximately 30 feet; if the classroom is too small to accommodate this have the class step out into the hallway). Does a duel at this range seem suicidal? (*Accept all answers.*) What kind of pistols were being used? (*.54 caliber smooth bore pistols.*) Explain that like most 18th century firearms, the dueling pistols Hamilton and Burr used were smoothbores—that is, without spiral “rifling” on the inside of the barrel to impart a stabilizing spin to the bullet—and as such were relatively inaccurate even at such close ranges. Accordingly, even if both men were taking true aim at each other, dueling wasn’t exactly a mutual suicide pact.

14. Ask students if they think both men did indeed take aim at each other. (*Accept all answers, but point out that all that’s known for certain is that Burr was unscathed, and that Hamilton was mortally wounded; anything more is conjecture.*) How had Hamilton advised his son Philip when Philip had faced a duel years earlier? (*That he should “waste” his shot by not aiming directly at his opponent.*) Philip heeded this advice—what had been the result? (*He was shot dead.*) Ask students why Hamilton, in his last letter to his wife, declared his intention to follow his own advice and not shoot at Burr? (*He believed that as a Christian, he could not take a life, and that it was “better to die innocent than live guilty.”*) What do the modern gang members interviewed in the segment think about this line of thinking? (*They think it was “stupid” and “senseless” not to have taken a real shot; “you done started it, you gotta finish it.”*) Ask students if they agree with this estimation. (*Accept all answers.*) Explain that when told after the duel of Hamilton’s supposed intention to spare his life, Burr’s response was very similar to that of the gang members—that it was “contemptible, if true.” Ask students why they think he may have said this? (*Accept all answers.*)

15. Assuming for a moment that Hamilton *had* deliberately fired into the air, would this have been an honorable option for a gentleman to have taken? (*Accept all answers.*) Would it have been in keeping with the rules of the Code Duello? (*Accept all answers.*) Return to the “The Code Duello” website and ask a volunteer to read Rule 13. What does it expressly forbid? (*“Dumb shooting,” or firing in the air, which it describes as “children’s play.”*) What is the rationale given for this prohibition? (*Essentially, that the grand gesture of wasting a shot has no place in a duel because it disrespects the moral stakes of what is, after all, the last resort of two men with a real and irresolvable dispute.*) Is this basically another way of saying “you done started it, you gotta finish it?” (*Accept all answers.*)

CULMINATING ACTIVITY

1. As homework, assign students to create their own multi-step “code” outlining a formal procedure of how they think disputes between two individuals could be honorably resolved. These may employ any type of behavior or action EXCEPT recourse to the law or to violence.

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2. During the next day's class period, have students briefly present their codes before the class. After each presentation, have the rest of the class discuss how realistic, practical, and effective they think that code is, noting the pros and cons of each code before making a final vote on which code they think is best.

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