

Aaron Burr

(1756–1836)

Aaron Burr led a highly controversial political career that culminated in one term as the third vice president of the United States. Born in Newark, New Jersey, Burr fought in the Revolutionary War and practiced law before turning to politics. He served as a U.S. senator from New York from 1791 to 1797, and received the vice presidential nomination from the Republican Party in 1800. Burr tied with Thomas Jefferson, and the election was thrown to the U.S. House of Representatives for a decision. After holding 36 votes, the House finally chose Jefferson as president and Burr vice president by a one-vote margin. This resulted in the passage of the 12th Amendment to the Constitution, which requires the electoral college to use separate ballots for president and vice president.

In July 1804 Burr mortally wounded his political opponent, New Yorker Alexander Hamilton, in a duel in Weehawken, New Jersey. Indicted in New York and New Jersey, Burr fled to the South. When Congress reconvened in November of that year, Burr returned to Washington, D.C., to complete his duties as president of the Senate. He was never tried for Hamilton's death.

Increasingly isolated from his party, Burr failed to be renominated as vice president and also lost a bid for governor of New York State. With his political career in decline—and heavily in debt—Burr promoted a scheme to form a republic in the Southwest. For this conspiracy, Burr was arrested in 1807 and tried for treason; however, he was acquitted of the charges. He left the United States and spent the next four years in Europe, avoiding creditors and promoting various personal projects. Burr returned home in 1812 and resumed his New York law practice. Although he avoided the political arena, he maintained an interest in the western and southern territories and in the future of Mexico. The former vice president died in 1836 at Port Richmond, Staten Island.

The German-born sculptor Jacques Jouvénal studied and worked abroad until he immigrated to the United States in 1853. After two years in New York City he moved to Washington, D.C., where he was hired to carve decorative architectural details for the new extension of the U.S. Capitol. The sculptor later turned to portraiture, and in 1893 he was awarded the Senate commission for a bust of Aaron Burr. Despite what many viewed as ignominious conduct by the former vice president, the Joint Committee on the Library, acting under an 1886 resolution, directed that the Burr likeness, along with four other vice presidential busts, be acquired for display in the Senate Chamber. Burr, like every other vice president, had carried out his duties as president of the Senate and therefore deserved to be honored.

Jouvénal likely based his sculpture on John Vanderlyn's 1802 oil portrait of Burr or on one of the many engravings of the painting available at the time. Vanderlyn's portrait, which depicts Burr in profile, became the standard likeness of the vice president and was widely disseminated in engraved form. George Parker, Hezekiah Wright Smith, and J.A. O'Neill

published renderings of Burr based on Vanderlyn's portrait. Jouvénal's marble bust of the vice president was completed in 1893 and placed on view in the Senate Chamber the following year. The artist is also represented in Washington, D.C., by a full-length sculpture of Benjamin Franklin in front of The Old Post Office Pavilion, on Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.



This 1802 painting of Aaron Burr by John Vanderlyn was widely distributed in engraved form and may have been the inspiration for the Senate's bust of the vice president.

(Collection of the New-York Historical Society)

Aaron Burr

Jacques Jouvenal (1829-1905)

Marble, 1893

30 ¼ x 26 ¼ x 16 ½ inches (76.8 x 66.7 x 41.9 cm)

Signed (on back of subject's left shoulder): JOUVENAL

Commissioned by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1893

Accepted by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1893

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