

■ Ciphpered Letter of Aaron Burr to General James Wilkinson

Date: July 29, 1806

Author: Aaron Burr

Genre: encrypted correspondence

Summary Overview

The letter presented here, originally composed in code, from former Vice President Aaron Burr to General James Wilkinson was a key piece of evidence that Burr and Wilkinson were involved in a plot to conduct an independent invasion of the lands west of the United States, lands that at the time were possessed by Spain. The uncertain veracity of the letter, and the contradictory testimony of the witnesses called at Burr's trial, meant that the outrageous content of the letter was not as damning as it might have appeared. The letter, however, spurred the federal government to pursue, arrest, and prosecute Burr.

Defining Moment

During the early nineteenth century, the western United States was a hotbed of schemes, scams, and shady land deals. Settlers, squatters, and land speculators poured into the west, encroaching on the lands of the new Louisiana Purchase and even the territory that belonged to the Spanish Empire. One of the men involved in such schemes was former Vice President Aaron Burr. Burr, who was well experienced in intrigues and plots of all sorts, left politics in 1805 and embarked on a scheme, many details of which are still mired in controversy.

On April 30, 1805, Burr, along with a private secretary, set off down the Ohio River from Pittsburgh. He attended a meeting on an island in the Ohio River, then met with General Andrew Jackson in Nashville, Tennessee. It is likely that Burr's conversations with Jackson concerned the possibility of war with Spain, which would most likely break out if Burr or others took possession of land held by Spain. In June, Burr met with General James Wilkinson, the newly appointed governor of the vast Louisiana Territory which, among other things, bordered Spanish territory. Wilkinson's bizarre career is far too vast to cover here. Relevant to this story, however, is the fact that Wilkinson had long been in the employ of Spain (as "Agent 13"), receiving regular payments for providing information to the Spanish government.

Throughout the summer of 1805, Burr travelled throughout the southwest, and returned to the eastern states in the autumn. In early 1806, Burr reportedly sought money for a vaguely defined "western expedition." On July 29, 1806, Burr sent this letter to General Wilkinson, in code. In September, Burr arranged for hiring several hundred men, boats, and provisions and bought 400,000 acres of land along the Ouachita River close to the border of Spanish-controlled lands. At the same time, one of Burr's associates was writing letters arguing for the separation of western states from the rest of the United States.

In October, Wilkinson received Burr's letter of July 29. Reportedly, Burr's secretary informed the General that Burr's plan was to take 7,000 troops and attack Spain's territory in Mexico. At this point, Wilkinson, who up until this point had been working with Burr, decided to inform President Thomas Jefferson of Burr's plans. Throughout the rest of 1806 and into early 1807, the federal government works to find Burr and arrest him, which occurred on February 19. The letter discussed here was a key piece of evidence in the case against Burr, who was charged with treason and planning to invade a friendly nation. This document would be one of the key pieces of evidence for the prosecution.

Author Biography

Among the members of the American Republic's founding generation, Aaron Burr is perhaps the most controversial and his reputation the most mercurial. As historians such as Peter Hoffer have noted, in many ways Burr would have been more at home in the political culture of the mid-nineteenth century than the late 1700s and the dawn of the 1800s. An early organizer of formal political parties and the beneficiary of partisan politics, Burr often seems out of step with members of his milieu who were more concerned with the functions of government rather than visceral politics.

Aaron Burr was born February 6, 1756, in Newark in what was then the British colony of New Jersey. Burr's father was a Presbyterian minister and his mother was the daughter of Jonathan Edwards, a New England clergyman closely identified with the Great Awakening of the mid-eighteenth century in the American colonies. Burr's parents both died when he was a young boy. He entered the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University) at the age of 13 and received his degree at age 16, in 1772. He continued there, studying theology. After a year, he left New Jersey, moving to Connecticut and shifting his studies to the law.

Following the outbreak of the American War of Independence, he joined forces marching to Canada. Although the rebel mission to Canada was not

successful, Burr made a name for himself at the Battle of Quebec. He returned to New York, fighting bravely but receiving very little recognition from Army leadership, particularly George Washington. He continued to lead troops in battle, but in 1779 he left the Army due to continued illness (from a bout of heat-stroke the previous year). He occasionally worked for the rebels on intelligence matters while completing his legal studies.

After the war, Burr practiced law and entered politics following the ratification of the new federal constitution. He drifted toward the Democratic-Republican faction associated with Thomas Jefferson and became a Senator from New York in the 1790s. Controversially, he refused to cede the presidency to party leader Thomas Jefferson when, in the election of 1800, both men received 73 electoral votes. Former Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton recommended that members of the Federalist faction support Jefferson, thus denying Burr the presidency. Hamilton, in 1804, subsequently worked against Burr's attempt to win the governorship of New York. These slights, among others, led to the infamous 1804 duel between Burr and Hamilton, in which Hamilton was killed.

Following the conclusion of Burr's trial for treason, he lived in Europe until 1812. He returned to New York, sporadically practicing law until his death in 1836.



Historical Document

Ciphred Letter of Aaron Burr to General James Wilkinson

Yours postmarked 13th May is received. I have obtained funds, and have actually commenced the enterprise. Detachments from different points under different pretences [sic] will rendezvous [sic] on the Ohio, 1st November—everything internal and external favors views—protection of England is secured. T[ruxton] is gone to Jamaica to arrange with the admiral on that station, and will meet at the Mississippi—England—Navy of the United States are ready to join, and final orders are given to my friends and followers—it will be a host of choice spirits. Wilkinson shall be second to Burr only—Wilkinson shall dictate the rank and promotion of his officers. Burr will proceed westward 1st August, never to return: with him go his daughter—the husband will follow in October with a corps of worthies. Send forthwith an intelligent and confidential friend with whom Burr may confer. He shall return immediately with further interesting details—this is essential to concert and harmony of the movement.

Send a list of all persons known to Wilkinson west of the mountains, who could be useful, with a note delineating their characters. By your messenger send me four or five of the commissions of your officers, which you can borrow under any pretence [sic] you please. They shall be returned faithfully. Already are orders to the contractor given to forward six months' provisions to points Wilkinson may name—this shall not be used until the last moment, and then under proper injunctions: the project is brought to the point so long desired: Burr guarantees the result with his life and honor—the lives, the honor and fortunes of hundreds, the best blood of our country. Burr's plan of operations is to move rapidly from the falls on the 15th of November, with the first five hundred or one thousand men, in light boats now constructing for that purpose—to be at Natchez between the 5th and 15th of December—then to meet Wilkinson—then to determine whether it will be expedient in the first instance to seize on or pass by Baton Rouge. On receipt of this send Burr an answer—draw on Burr for all expenses, &c. The people of the country to which we are going are prepared to receive us—their agents now with Burr say that if we will protect their religion, and will not subject them to a foreign power, that in three weeks all will be settled. The gods invite to glory and fortune—it remains to be seen whether we deserve the boon. The bearer of this goes express to you—he will hand a formal letter of introduction to you from Burr, a copy of which is hereunto subjoined. He is a man of inviolable honor and perfect discretion—formed to execute rather than project—capable of relating facts with fidelity, and incapable of relating them otherwise. He is thoroughly informed of the plans and intentions of Burr, and will disclose to

you as far as you inquire, and no further—he has imbibed a reverence for your character, and may be embarrassed in your presence—put him at ease and he will satisfy you.

July 29



Glossary

boon: benefit, gift

forthwith: immediately; with all possible speed

“goes express”: directly, without delay

“hereunto subjoined”: attached to the present letter

pretences [sic]: false explanations for activities or behavior

worthies: notable people

Document Themes and Analysis

This letter was written by Burr. It was translated into code, which General James Wilkinson deciphered upon receipt. Burr begins by assuring Wilkinson that he has been able to secure money and has “commenced the enterprise.” This is a tricky phrase, as there was considerable dispute at the time (and today) about the exact nature of the “enterprise” Burr planned. Regardless of the details of the enterprise, Burr is promising to send groups of men, each with a different story (or “pretence”) to rendezvous at the Ohio River. Burr claims that England is supportive of the plan and General Wilkinson will be able to organize the forces as he wishes, which plainly makes this sound like a military operation. Burr ends the first paragraph by calling for Wilkinson to send a messenger to receive more detailed information directly from Burr.

The second paragraph sees Burr request details of available personnel for the expedition and more details of the plans, with Burr mentioning specific dates and locations. There is still much that is vague, however—while the departure or rendezvous points are clear (Natchez, Baton Rouge) the destinations are not, with references to “the country to which we are going,” for example. The brief letter closes with reassurance about the “inviolable honor and perfect discretion” of the messenger, pointing out—somewhat flatteringly—that the messenger is such an admirer of General Wilkinson that he may be uncomfortable in the great man’s presence.

The letter was the key piece of evidence that triggered Wilkinson’s “conversion,” and Thomas Jefferson’s in-

sistence on trying Burr for treason. The letter, however, was vague and no original existed. In any case, the original had been in code. At Burr’s trial, the witnesses’ testimony failed to either agree with each other or prove treason. According to Article III, Section 3 of the U.S. Constitution, “Treason against the United States, shall consist only in levying war against them [i.e., the United States], or in adhering to their enemies, giving them [enemies] aid and comfort.” Further, the Constitution specifies that “no person shall be convicted of treason unless on the testimony of two witnesses to the same overt act, or on confession in open court.” Given these restrictions on the meaning of treason and the evidence required to prove it, the court had no choice but to acquit Burr.

—Aaron John Gulyas, MA

Bibliography and Additional Reading

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