

AARON BURR IN CHESTER

In 1938 the Mary Adair Chapter, D.A.R. placed an inscription on a rough-hewn rock to commemorate a most unusual event in Chester's history. The inscription on the rock that sits on the highest hill in downtown Chester reads: "In 1806 Aaron Burr, when passing through Chester, a prisoner, dismounted on this rock and appealed in vain to the citizens for help."

The date 1806 is wrong. It was March 1807 when Aaron Burr, former vice-president of the United States, the youngest colonel of the Revolutionary War, whose blue-blooded ancestors included the first president of Princeton, was marched into town under arrest by the United States Army and charged with high treason.

This was the second blot on Aaron Burr's otherwise satisfactory career. While vice-president, Burr challenged and killed Alexander Hamilton, former secretary of the treasury, in a duel. Dueling was legal in New Jersey but the act ruined any chances that Burr might become President Jefferson's successor.

Burr made a southern tour to Georgia, where dueling was more acceptable, and came up the coast to visit his beloved daughter, Theodosia Alston and her family at the Alston plantation (now Brookgreen Gardens). He then returned to Washington and made a farewell speech to the U.S. Senate.

Burr next got involved in speculation in western land. Spain gave him a grant for 400,000 acres in Texas for \$40,000 with \$5,000 down. An estimated 500 followers were ready to join Aaron Burr in what many thought was a project to establish a new country. Pres. Thomas Jefferson had Burr arrested in Kentucky but he was ably defended by Henry Clay and acquitted.

In February 1807 Burr was arrested in Mississippi Territory and charged with treason. The army guards wished to avoid the populous coastal areas and especially South Carolina, where Burr was popular, so they marched him through the backwoods destined for Richmond, Va. to be tried by Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, John Marshall.

On horseback, the group reached the village of Chester. According to records, there were two soldiers in front of Burr, two behind him, and one on each side. As they approached a tavern, Burr flung himself from his horse, mounted the rock, and shouted to the bystanders: "I'm Aaron Burr, under military arrest, and claim the protection of the civil authorities."

Officers forced Burr to remount and marched on. About dark the party got to John Lewis' Tavern (the spot on S.C. 74 between Chester and Rock Hill now called Lewis Turnout). Officer

Perkins, in charge of Burr, later said that at Lewis' tavern, he found his famous prisoner, and the soldier leading his horse, in a flood of tears. Presumably, Burr's usual great self-assurance had vanished with the cold-shoulder treatment by the people of Chesterville. That night, Burr reportedly slept on a bench at the tavern.

The next day the party moved on to Richmond for the trial. His son-in-law Joseph Alston and daughter Theodosia were there to see 51-year-old Aaron Burr tried on the charge of conspiring to make himself emperor of a large part of the Louisiana Purchase and Texas. Historians still debate whether Burr, who was originally arrested for a misdemeanor, not treason, intended to create an empire for himself or whether he was mounting a filibustering expedition against Spain.

The trial was a sensation. Political passions created a stormy setting. President Jefferson was summoned to testify but refused to do so. The law required that there be two witnesses to the overt act of treason and Chief Justice Marshall construed the law narrowly. Only one creditable witness was found. The jury found Burr "not guilty under the indictment by evidence submitted to us."

After the trial, Burr sailed for England but he returned to New York in 1812 at the same time that Joseph Alston was elected governor of South Carolina. Theodosia Burr Alston sailed alone for New York to see her father. She never arrived. The ship was lost at sea--either the victim of Cape Hatteras' treacherous currents or of pirates who were active in the area off the Outer Banks at that time.

Usually the monuments erected by the Daughters of the American Revolution commemorate the deeds of Revolutionary War heroes. And although Aaron Burr was a genuine hero of the Revolution, the Aaron Burr rock inscription simply reminds us of one of the most interesting trials in American history.