

# AARON BURR ON THE EXPEDITION TO QUEBEC

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By

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In September of 1775, Colonel Benedict Arnold set out on an expedition with 1130 men<sup>1</sup> to attack Quebec by marching through the untamed wilderness of Maine to reach the Chaudière River in Canada, which emptied into the St. Lawrence River near Quebec. Arnold's expedition was one prong of a two pronged effort to conquer Canada by taking its capital, the walled City of Quebec, and thereby making Canada the 14<sup>th</sup> U.S. colony. Many of the men that were with Arnold on this famous trek went on to achieve fame in military and civilian careers.<sup>2</sup> None rose higher than Aaron Burr who was a youth of 19 when the march was undertaken.

Born at Newark New Jersey in 1756, Aaron Burr, the future 3<sup>rd</sup> Vice President of the United States, had a distinguished family background. His father was Aaron Burr, Sr., President of the College of New Jersey, which later became Princeton University, and his mother was the daughter of Jonathan Edwards, the well-known New Light Calvinist minister. By 1758, both of Burr's parents were dead, as well as his grandparents, including Jonathan Edwards. The guardianship of the two Burr children was taken on by Burr's uncle, Timothy Edwards, in 1759. Timothy Edwards was married to Rhoda Ogden, the sister of his friend, Matthias Ogden.<sup>3</sup>

According to biographer Matthew L. Davis<sup>4</sup>, Burr was studying law in Litchfield, Connecticut, with his brother-in-law, Tapping Reeve, when he learned of the Battle of Lexington. Wanting to get involved, Burr wrote to his New Jersey friend and Princeton classmate, Matthias Ogden, urging Ogden to join him in Litchfield, where both could make arrangements to join the American Army. Ogden declined to join Burr, so Burr made his way to Elizabethtown, New Jersey, where Ogden was living, and convinced him in person to go to Cambridge. In July, both men arrived in Cambridge where the headquarters of the American Army was located. Davis claims that Burr was afflicted by a nervous fever shortly after arriving in Cambridge but before he enlisted in a military unit.<sup>5</sup>

Sometime prior to September 14, most likely in August of 1775, while still in Cambridge, Burr and Ogden learned about a proposed expedition to attack the City of Quebec in Canada being organized by Colonel Benedict Arnold. Davis says that Burr was so eager to participate in this campaign that he "raised himself up in the bed, and declared that he would accompany them..."<sup>6</sup> Burr and Ogden then visited Arnold's camp and offered their services.

Burr and Ogden did not join one of the 13 companies that were included in Arnold's army; instead they were attached to Arnold's detachment as volunteers with no rank.<sup>7</sup> Most likely the best position that Burr and Ogden could assume was that of a gentleman volunteer, which allowed them to join Arnold's army, but with no specific unit assignment and no military rank or status. This turned out to be a good decision because both achieved fame, recognition and credibility during the march and at the December 31, 1775 attack on Quebec.

In a sworn statement on April 5, 1834, Burr provided the following details of his military service on the Quebec expedition. “Declarant remained at Cambridge as a volunteer in such army until some time in the month of September following when he joined the detachment under Genl. Arnold as a Volunteer and marched with him to Canada by way of the Kennebeck River, on arriving among the first inhabitants on the River Chaudière declarant was charged by Genl. Arnold with a secret message to Genl. Montgomery which was executed according to orders...”<sup>8</sup> Davis provides more details about Burr’s involvement as a messenger, “On the arrival of Arnold’s detachment at Chaudière Pond, Burr was dispatched with a verbal communication to General Montgomery. He disguised himself as a young Catholic priest...” Davis describes Burr’s movements to get from Arnold to Montgomery in some detail, including hiding in a convent for three days. Davis concludes his story by claiming that Montgomery “was so well pleased with the ... manner in which young Burr had effected his journey after leaving Arnold...” that he invited Burr to become one of his aides.<sup>9</sup>

Although there were thirty-eight separate journals written by participants in the Arnold expedition, including a portion of one written by Matthias Ogden, there are only two mentions of Burr. The earliest is from Dr. Isaac Senter’s Journal entry for the 26<sup>th</sup> of September. “This morning at 10, left F. Western in company with Lieut. Col. Greene [Christopher], Mr. Burr and several other gentlemen...”<sup>10</sup> This entry confirms that as of September 26, Burr was among those men who left Fort Western in what is now, Augusta, Maine, to begin the march through the wilderness. The second journal entry is from John Joseph Henry’s lengthy account of the expedition. “Nov 3d. Here it was that for the first time, Aaron Burr, a most amiable youth of twenty, came to my view. He was then a cadet.”<sup>11</sup> It is surprising that Burr’s friend, Ogden, makes no mention of him in his journal.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to the two journal accounts of Burr, he was also mentioned in the Memoirs of John Lamb, whose artillery company came to Canada with Brigadier General Richard Montgomery. Lamb describes his first meeting with Burr as follows.

On this occasion, the General [Montgomery] was accompanied by Aaron Burr, whom he had appointed as his aid. This was the first time that Lamb had ever seen him; and as his appearance was juvenile in the extreme, he wondered that the General should encumber his family, with the addition of one, who seemed a mere boy. But upon a more thorough scrutiny of his countenance, the fire of his eye, and his perfect coolness and immobility, under such dangerous fire, convinced him that this young volunteer was no ordinary man; and not out of place in the most important position.”<sup>13</sup>

In addition to Lamb’s description, Benedict Arnold mentions Burr in two letters regarding the Quebec campaign. The first was written on November 30, 1775 to General Montgomery where Arnold says this about Burr. “He is a young gentleman of much life and activity, and has acted with great spirit and resolution on our fatiguing march. His conduct, I make no doubt, will be a sufficient recommendation to your favor.”<sup>14</sup> The second is a December 31, 1775, letter from Arnold to General David Wooster, who was then commanding in Montreal, where he is summarizing the events that had occurred during the attack on Quebec. “The loss of my detachment, before I left it, was about two hundred men, killed and wounded. Among the latter is Major Ogden, who, with Captain Oswald, Captain Burr, and the other volunteers, behaved extremely well.”<sup>15</sup> It is clear from these excerpts that Arnold thought very highly of Burr’s conduct during the expedition and at the assault on Quebec.

As a result of his appointment as an aide to Montgomery, Burr was in the general's entourage in the attack on the Lower City in which Montgomery was killed. There are three different versions of Burr's actions involving Montgomery's death. The first is contained in an early epic poem which tells of Burr carrying the body of Montgomery off the field on his shoulders.<sup>16</sup> Second is the famous painting by John Trumbull, titled *The Death of Montgomery*, which shows Montgomery's body falling into the arms of one of his aides.<sup>17</sup> Matthew L. Davis, claim that the aide was Aaron Burr. Finally, Burr's friend and classmate, Chaplain Samuel Spring wrote that Burr went back to get Montgomery's body, but was unable to do so because the snow was so deep and because Burr was so small and Montgomery was so large.<sup>18</sup> Since none of three major sources were in the battle, all of them were relying at best on second hand accounts or at worst on fantasized versions that they themselves created. Samuel Spring was at least at Quebec, but as a chaplain was nowhere near the actual fighting.

The only eyewitness who wrote a full account about Montgomery's death, Colonel Donald Campbell<sup>19</sup>, makes no mention of any attempt to recover bodies of the dead on the day of the attack or any specific action by Burr. It is likely that none of the above versions regarding Burr are factual and that Burr had no involvement with Montgomery's death or retrieving his body. Burr's own declaration fails to mention that he carried out any specific action in terms of Montgomery's death.<sup>20</sup>

What is clear from the various accounts of Burr is that he was on the expedition and that his abilities were recognized by Arnold even though he was only a volunteer. As a result of his actions, Burr was recommended to Montgomery who selected him as an aide. There is no specific incident or action by Burr that can be found in any contemporary account relating to the expedition, other than Davis's account of his delivery of the message to Montgomery. Burr went on to have a very extensive career in the law and politics. Burr, like Arnold, rose high and then fell when he killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel and later become associated with and, at Jefferson's insistence, an allegation of treason.

A titillating but unsubstantiated story to come out of the Arnold expedition involves Burr supposedly meeting an Indian princess when the expedition was camped on Swan Island in the Kennebec River in Maine. According to the story, the princess' name was Jacataqua and she was half Abenaki Indian and half French.<sup>21</sup>

The first evidence of the Jacataqua story in print is in an article in the *Magazine of New England History* in 1893 written by Charles E. Allen.<sup>22</sup> Allen says he first heard the story while searching for material for his history of Dresden, Maine. An old resident of Dresden related the story his grandfather had told him regarding Burr and Jacataqua. Allen says that "I heard a fragment of it in Augusta, and found that nearly thirty years ago a well-known writer had printed it in a local paper, and claimed that its main points were absolutely true, and that years before got them of General Henry Dearborn, who settled in Gardiner after the revolution." Dearborn allegedly confirmed that during the march the men killed and ate his dog but spared the dog accompanying the Indian princess. Dearborn's journal actually states that the men killed and ate two dogs, including his own. His journal does not identify the second dog's owner.<sup>23</sup>

Allen finds credibility in the story because of the reference to Dearborn as a source, although it should be pointed out that Dearborn was a strong supporter of Thomas Jefferson, who was an enemy of Burr and the source of the treason charge against Burr in 1807. Allen also justifies it because "many romances of the last century are based upon much frailer foundations than this is, and the hero and heroine are no more

respectable".<sup>24</sup> This is a very thin argument to establish the credibility and reliability of such a romance and Allen does not identify the other romances to which he is referring.

The story has Burr "marrying" the young girl while he was on Swan Island.<sup>25</sup> The legend has it that she never returned back to Swan Island. The young Indian maiden is described as the daughter of a chief, so she is called a princess or queen by some, and she is described as a beautiful nineteen year old.<sup>26</sup> The story tells of Jacataqua providing bear meat for the banquet at Fort Western and then accompanying Burr through the wilderness to Quebec. Burr gives the now pregnant girl to the care of a friendly British officer who they meet in the woods near Quebec.<sup>27</sup> Since Burr and the British officer were on opposite sides, this story strains credibility to suggest that almost immediately upon their meeting, Burr and the British officer would strike such a bargain involving his pregnant girlfriend (wife).

The child of Jacataqua and Burr was born in Quebec and, as the legend goes, was named Chesnutania.<sup>28</sup> Even if the rest of the story were true, this name seems extremely far-fetched. Jacataqua supposedly followed Burr from Canada to his command on Long Island later in the war. The end of the story as far as Jacataqua is concerned occurred after the duel with Hamilton when Burr became a pariah. Because of her love for Burr and her sorrow for his loss of prestige, the story says she drowned herself in Hell Gate Falls on the Kennebec River.<sup>29</sup> The daughter, Chesnutania, is supposedly taken to Scotland by the British officer that Burr and Jacataqua met in the woods. After a number of years, she is convinced by Burr to return to New York when he was living in the old Jay mansion. She opens a boarding house and cares for Burr to the end of his life.<sup>30</sup> An incident in the Parton biography regarding Burr, which indirectly implies that the woman who cared for him in his old age was his daughter, is used in another article by Allen to support this aspect of the story.<sup>31</sup>

There are at least thirty books and articles about the Quebec expedition published since Allen's article that include some or all of the details of the Jacataqua story. Probably the most well-known book to mention Jacataqua, although no involvement with Burr is indicated, is the Kenneth Roberts novel *Arundel* written in 1931.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, no Arnold or Burr biography written in the nineteenth century has any mention of the Burr romance. In 1860, a book called *The Amorous Intrigues and Adventures of Aaron Burr*<sup>33</sup> was published by Anonymous. Even this book, which seems well positioned by its title to tell the story, contained no hint of Jacataqua. The Arnold expedition has been more thoroughly documented with original journals and letters than any similar campaign in the Revolutionary War.<sup>34</sup> However, there is no hint of the Jacataqua story in any journal, letter or contemporary news report of the expedition.

In a 1903 publication by the Aaron Burr Legion, the Commander-in-Chief of the Legion says about the Jacataqua story: "I have made the most careful search in order to substantiate either the truth or falsity of this story, and can find only this--that it emanated from a clique hostile to Colonel Burr, and, so far as I can learn, never proceeded outside of the limit of the influence of that clique".<sup>35</sup> This author's research has failed to uncover any credible contemporary account of the Jacataqua story. Unfortunately, the affair between Burr and Jacataqua is a typical fictional story of the Revolutionary era that was subsequently turned into a historical fact long after the war was over.

## END NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The number of men in the Arnold expedition is taken from, Darley, Stephen. *Voices from a Wilderness Expedition: The Journals and Men of Benedict Arnold's Expedition to Quebec in 1775*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Among the men with Arnold on his expedition were Brigadier General Daniel Morgan of Virginia, Senior Major General Henry Dearborn of New Hampshire, Colonel Mathis Ogden of New Jersey, Colonel Christopher Green of Rhode Island, and Brigadier General Simeon Thayer of Rhode Island..

<sup>3</sup> Aaron Burr. Wikipedia. [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aaron\\_Burr](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aaron_Burr).

<sup>4</sup> Davis, Matthew L. *Memoirs of Aaron Burr with Miscellaneous Selections from His Correspondence*. 2 vols. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1836.

<sup>5</sup> Davis, 58.

<sup>6</sup> Davis, 59.

<sup>7</sup> By the time Burr and Ogden joined the expedition, the officers for the expedition had most likely been selected so their best opportunity was to serve as volunteers rather than join the enlisted ranks. It would not have been feasible for Arnold to give the two inexperienced friends an appointment as officers and then assign them to a company. Arnold allowed each company commander to select his staff of officers.

<sup>8</sup> Pension Application of Aaron Burr. R-12837. National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. Revolutionary War Pension Files, M804, Record Group 15. It is surprising that by 1834 Burr was without any means of income and therefore needed to apply for a pension from the government for his Revolutionary War service. [www.fold3.com](http://www.fold3.com).

<sup>9</sup> Davis, 67-70.

<sup>10</sup> Isaac Senter's journal can be found in Roberts, Kenneth. *March to Quebec*: The reference to Burr is on p. 200.

<sup>10</sup> *Journals of the Members of Arnold's Expedition*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1938. The reference to Burr is on p. 200.

<sup>11</sup> John Joseph Henry's journal can also be, found in Roberts *March to Quebec*, p. 343.

<sup>12</sup> "Journal of Major Matthias Ogden in Arnold's Campaign against Quebec, 1775." *Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society*, Vol. XIII, No. 1, January 1928: 17-30.

<sup>13</sup> Leake, Isaac Q. *Memoir of the Life and Times of General John Lamb*. Glendale, NY: Benchmark Publishing Company, 1970: 125-26.

<sup>14</sup> Benedict Arnold letter to General Montgomery, dated from Point Aux Trembles, 30<sup>th</sup> Nov. 1775, Roberts, *March to Quebec*, 101.

<sup>15</sup> Letter from Benedict Arnold to General Wooster, General Hospital, December 31, 1775. Roberts, *March to Quebec*, 102-3.

<sup>16</sup> Breckenridge, Hugh Henry. *The Death of General Montgomery*. Norwich, CT, 1777.

<sup>17</sup> John Trumbull (1756-1843). Oil Painting. "The Death of General Montgomery in the Attack on Quebec, December 31, 1775." Original at Yale Art Gallery, New Haven, CT.

<sup>18</sup> Brown, Everett Somerville. William Plumer's Memorandum on the Proceedings in the United States Senate. London, 1923: 612.

<sup>19</sup> Letter from Donald Campbell to Robert R. Livingston. Dated, Quebec, 28<sup>th</sup> March 1776.

<sup>20</sup> See End Note #8.

<sup>21</sup> Haskell, Jessica J. "A Man and a Maid." Chapter 22. The Maine Federation of Women's Clubs. *The Trail of the Maine Pioneer*. Lewiston, ME: Lewiston Journal Publisher, 1916.

[www.kellscraft.com/MainePioneer/MainePioneerCh22.html](http://www.kellscraft.com/MainePioneer/MainePioneerCh22.html). Pages 1-7.

<sup>22</sup> Allen, Charles E. "A Short Romance of Arnold's Kennebec Expedition of 1775." Magazine of New England History, Vol. III, Newport, R.I., 1893: 227-232.

<sup>23</sup> Henry Dearborn's journal. Roberts, *March to Quebec*. The entry regarding eating the dogs is on p. 139.

<sup>24</sup> Allen, 231.

<sup>25</sup> Allen, 229.

<sup>26</sup> Allen, 230; Carll, Mrs. E.C. "Queen of the Kennebec." Chapter 12. *The Trail of the Maine Pioneer*, 1916.

<sup>27</sup> Allen, 230.

<sup>28</sup> The name Chestnutania first appeared in the Allen version of the story in 1893.

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<sup>29</sup> No historical document has been found to support the story of Jacataqua killing herself.

<sup>30</sup> Carll, Mrs. E.C. "Queen of the Kennebec."

<sup>31</sup> The incident quoted from Parton's biography of Burr is from Charles E. Allen. "Ancient Pownalboro and Her Daughters." *New England Magazine*. New Series Vol. 24, March & August, 1901: 533.

<sup>32</sup> Roberts, Kenneth. *Arundel*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1930. There are various references to Jacataqua throughout Roberts' story beginning on p. 213. He also has a number of scenes with Burr interacting with other characters.

<sup>33</sup> Anonymous. *The Amorous Intrigues and Adventures of Aaron Burr*. Introduction by Fender Tucker. 1860. See <http://www.ramblehouse.com/aaronburrchapter.htm>.

<sup>34</sup> See my book, *Voices from a Wilderness Expedition*, where in Chapter One I identify thirty journals written by participants in the Arnold expedition. Since then more journals have been discovered bringing the total to thirty-eight.

<sup>35</sup> "Opening Address of the Councilor-in-Chief at the Aaron Burr Memorial Meeting held at Newark, N.J., July 14, 1900." *The Aaron Burr Memorial ... in Commemoration of the 147<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Birthday of Colonel Aaron Burr*. Boston: Mount Vernon Book & Music Co., 1903: 4.