

Proposal

Title – Presidential Prosecution: Thomas Jefferson and the 1807 Treason Trial of Aaron Burr

Program of Study – History

Presentation Type – Choose one of the following: PowerPoint

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Category –Textual or Investigative

Abstract: This paper examines the events surrounding the treason trial of America’s third Vice President, Aaron Burr. For the past two centuries, whenever historians consider villains of American history, Burr is almost always on the list. As the generally accepted version of the story goes, after killing Alexander Hamilton at their infamous duel in 1804, Aaron Burr realized he would have no future in American politics. Disgraced and desperate, Burr allegedly developed a plan to take over America’s western states and territories, conquer Mexico, and establish a new country with himself as its leader. The “Burr Conspiracy,” so titled by the newspapers of the day and the history books to follow, ended with Burr’s arrest and subsequent trial for treason in 1807. Despite being acquitted at trial, politicians and journalists of Burr’s day insisted on portraying Burr as a man who valued personal power over the good of his country. This documentary analysis asks the question, did the historians get it wrong? Could it be that the “Burr Conspiracy” was blown out of proportion by Burr’s political rivals, including President Thomas Jefferson? This review of the surviving primary sources written by the principal actors in the Burr saga reveals that Jefferson and Burr’s other political enemies capitalized on the public’s distrust of Burr to prosecute him in both a Virginia courtroom as well as the court of public opinion. This documentary analysis proceeds by first examining the existing

historiography of the Burr Conspiracy. Afterwards, the paper focuses on filling a gap in the historiography by analyzing previously unstudied evidence, which indicates that Burr's 1807 treason trial was, at least in part, due to political rivalries in the Commonwealth of Kentucky as well as in the highest offices in the newly formed United States of America.