



Extended History of Collection M-018 – Burr, Theodosia

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1.0 Theodosia Bartow Burr-Alston (June 21, 1783 - c January 2/3, 1813) was the daughter and only child of **Theodosia Stillwell Bartow Prevost-Burr** (1746-1794) and the controversial U.S. Vice President **Aaron Burr** (1756-1836). (*For clarity we will call the daughter of Burr and Theodosia, Theo*) She was born in Albany, NY and raised in New York City.

Theo's mother, also named Theodosia, was the first wife of Aaron Burr. She, however, had previously been married to **Col. James Mark Prevost** (1736-1781), an officer in the British Army in America. They had had five children together, three daughters and two sons, **John Bartow Prevost** (1766-1825) and **Augustine James Frederick Prevost** (1767-1842) These five were step siblings of Theo.

Theo's education was very closely supervised by her mother and father They stressed mental discipline, rare for girls of her generation. Besides conventional subjects she studied arithmetic, Latin, Greek, French and English composition. She could read and write at three, and had read Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by age ten. She applied herself to English in the form of letters to Aaron Burr, which were returned to her promptly, with detailed criticism. At age ten (1794), her mother Theodosia died. Her father still closely supervised her social education. She has been called among the most educated women of her day. By age 14 Theo began to serve as hostess for her father. Once when Burr was away, in 1797, Theo presided over a dinner for Joseph Brant, Chief of the Six Nations.

On February 2, 1801 she married **Joseph Alston**, a wealthy land owner and politician from Georgetown County, South Carolina. She became prominent in South Carolina social circles. Her letters to her father indicated that she had formed an affectionate alliance with Joseph. The couple's son, **Aaron Burr Alston**, was born in 1802. In the spring of 1807, her father was arrested for treason. During his trial Theo was with him, providing comfort and support. He was acquitted of the charges but left for Europe, where he remained for four years. While he was in exile, Theo acted as his agent in America, raising money, which she sent to her father, and transmitting messages. Theo wrote letters to Secretary of Treasury **Albert Gallatin** and to **Dolly Madison** in an effort to secure a smooth return for Aaron. He returned to New York in July, 1812 but his daughter could not quickly join him. Her son had succumbed to a fever and died on June, 30 and the anguish involved nearly killed Theo. She had to wait until December before she could make the journey.

On December 31, 1812, Theo sailed aboard the schooner ***Patriot*** from Georgetown, South Carolina. The *Patriot* was a famously fast ship. She had been refitted in December in Georgetown, her guns dismantled and hidden below decks. Her name



was painted out. The captain desired to make a rapid run to New York with his cargo. The *Patriot* and all those on board were never heard from again, assumed lost off Cape Hatteras.

2.0 Frances Ann Smith Prevost (1780-1807) was the daughter of Samuel Stanhope Smith (1751-1819), the seventh President of Princeton University and Ann Witherspoon Smith (1749-1817). Frances was the granddaughter of John Witherspoon (1723-1794), one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. She married John Bartow Prevost on February 5, 1799. They had four children together.

From the tone of this letter by Theo she must have had a close relationship with her sister-in-law, Frances. The letter is not dated but it had to have been written some time between 1799 (the year of Frances' marriage to John Bartow Prevost), and the year of Frances' death in New Orleans on October 31, 1807.

3.0 John Bartow Prevost (1766-1825) was the son of the British Officer Col James Mark Prevost and Theodosia Stillwell Bartow Prevost.

At the age of about eleven he served, with his younger brother **Augustine James Frederic Prevost** (1767-1842), as an ensign in his father's British Army regiment. This was the Royal Americans, 60th of Foot. The brothers served in 1779 in Georgia but were returned to their mother's home in Paramus, New Jersey in 1780 to avoid the fevers of Florida and Georgia.

John Bartow Prevost's father died in Jamaica in 1781. His mother Theodosia married Aaron Burr in 1782. The young Prevost brothers were raised as his own by their step father Aaron Burr. John worked in Burr's law office and became a successful lawyer. He was Recorder of New York City from 1801-1804, when President Jefferson appointed him as one of the first judges of the Superior Court in New Orleans after the Louisiana Purchase. In 1808, after Frances' death, Prevost resigned from the bench and practiced law in New Orleans. In 1818 he was tasked by Secretary of State **John Quincy Adams** with securing U.S. possession of the Oregon Territory as reparations from the British government for the War of 1812 and as spelled out in the **Treaty of Ghent**. The U.S. Navy sent **Captain James Biddle** on the *U.S.S. Ontario* to the Columbia River, with Prevost. Biddle declared American possession of both shores of the river estuary. Prevost, as the American Special Agent, arrived later that year and symbolically reasserted the nation's interest by raising the Stars and Stripes on the flagpole at Fort George (*originally called Fort Astoria by the Americans*). Later Prevost was appointed by **President James Monroe** to the post of American Commissioner to examine the state of Spanish colonies in South America. Prevost spent many years in Peru and moved his family there. His son married a Peruvian woman. Prevost died in Peru on March 5, 1825.



4.0 Aaron Burr, (1756-1836) Theo Burr Alston's father, was an American aristocrat, military officer, brilliant civil lawyer, legislator and the third Vice President of the US under President Jefferson. After serving as an Army officer in the Revolutionary War, Burr became a successful lawyer and politician. He was elected twice to the NY Assembly (1784/85, 1798/99), was appointed NY Attorney General (1789-1791), a US Senator (1791-1797) from NY, and Vice President of the United States (1801-1805). In 1804, Burr killed his political rival **Alexander Hamilton** in a duel. He was never tried for the illegal duel, with all charges eventually dropped. Hamilton's death, ended Burr's political career and he never held office again. Burr went west seeking new economic and political opportunities. He was eventually arrested on charges of treason in 1807 but subsequently acquitted. He left for Europe in 1808. After returning from Europe in 1812 Burr again took up the law and lived to the age of 80 years.

5.0 Joseph Alston (1779-1816), Young Theo's husband, was born near Georgetown, SC. He attended the College of New Jersey, but left in 1796 without graduating. He studied law at the office of **Edward Rutledge** and was admitted to the bar. Alston decided against practicing law and instead engaged in planting, becoming one of the wealthiest planters in SC. In 1801, he married Theo Burr. He served in the SC legislature, was elected Governor in 1812 for a two-year term, which was a rocky one because it was during the War of 1812. He left the governorship in 1814, was in poor health and died on September 19, 1816 in Charleston at age thirty seven

6.0 Theodosia Stillwell Bartow Prevost-Burr (Oct/Nov, 1746-May 18, 1794) –

Theodosia was the daughter of **Ann Sands Stillwell** and **Theodosius Bartow**, an attorney. Her father died several weeks before she was born. She was raised for five years by her mother who then married her step father **Captain Philip de Visme**. Theodosia was well tutored. She learnt fluent French, later writing letters to Burr and translating French political treatises.

At seventeen, Theodosia married Lt Col. James Mark Prevost a British officer of Swiss heritage. They had five children: three daughters and two sons – John Bartow Prevost and Augustine James Frederick Provost.

Despite her husband being an officer in the British Army, Theodosia was a patriot. Theodosia's home, the **Hermitage**, became a gathering-place for American officers. When Washington was in the area after the Battle of Monmouth, she invited him to stay there. He accepted and in July 1778, and briefly utilized the **Hermitage** as his headquarters. Other visitors included General Charles Lee, James Monroe, Lafayette, Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr. This was while the rebel military was operating in the Paramus, NJ area.



Theodosia first met Burr in August, 1778. They became friends and Burr began regularly visiting her home in Paramus. By November, 1778 his constant visits to the Hermitage provoked gossip. They gradually fell in love, and by 1780 were openly lovers.

Theodosia learned in December, 1781 that her first husband had died in Jamaica. She and Burr were married on July 2, 1782 at the Hermitage

Theodosia was ten years older than the 25 year old Burr, not very good looking, but was extremely intelligent, well read and a women of the world. She captivated Burr. They had an *"intellectual partnership"* and wrote letters to each other notable for their candor. Theodosia often disagreed with her husband's views, *"never shy to point out his flaws"*. Burr treated her as he would any other intelligent person, giving her political books and newspapers that he thought she would enjoy. Theodosia's keen sense of observation and adeptness at *"judging Burr's peers on the national scene"* made her a crucial ally in his political career.

They both had a *"passionate commitment to education"* and Theodosia educated their daughter and only surviving child, Theodosia Bartow Burr- Alston (Theo), as any wealthy male child would have been educated. Burr handled more and more of this as Theodosia's health deteriorated. By 1792 she was in regular pain. She died on May 28, 1794. Burr later wrote that she was *"the best woman and finest lady" he had ever known*". It has been conjectured that since she was a very positive influence on Burr that if she had lived he might have avoided some of his later difficulties. They did have a happy marriage. **(See Mercantile Library Special Collection Letter M-18).**

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