

INTRODUCTION

IN THE SUMMER OF 1829, THOMAS SPOTSWOOD HINDE INITIATED A correspondence with former president James Madison. Having heard that Madison was writing “a Political History of our Country,” Hinde offered to provide essential information for this project. Born in Virginia in 1785, Hinde had moved to Kentucky with his family as a child; in his twenties and thirties, he had been a newspaper editor, a businessman, and a Methodist minister in Ohio and Illinois. But the story that he proposed to tell Madison was not that of the western pioneer, the town founder, or the circuit rider. Instead, he offered information about “that Singular transaction” known as the Burr Conspiracy. As he remembered events from more than two decades earlier, he had provided “the first disclosure in the West of the plot for [the] dismemberment of the *Union* under Mr. [Thomas] Jefferson’s administration.”¹ Madison, formerly Jefferson’s secretary of state, had no plans to write a history. Still, he agreed that Hinde’s “authentic facts” should be preserved. If Hinde could not find a better repository for them, Madison replied, “a statement of them may find a place among my political papers.”² After hearing from Madison, Hinde quickly prepared a brief account of the Burr Conspiracy in Ohio and Kentucky. Within a month, he had written a much longer and more complete narrative, running to nineteen handwritten pages, and sent both to Madison.

Hinde’s story was not a full account of the Burr Conspiracy from its inception to its conclusion but a partial tale of how a group of young westerners learned of the conspiracy, exposed it to the public, and, by doing so, defeated it. It assumed some knowledge of Aaron Burr’s history before the spring of 1805—his heroic service in the Revolutionary War; his active role in creating the Republican party in New York; his controversial part in the election of 1800, in which he was elected vice president; his strained relations with President Jefferson and other leading Republicans; and his fatal duel with Federalist rival Alexander Hamilton in July 1804. Hinde’s story began in April 1805, when Burr crossed the Appalachian Mountains on a tour of the West.³ Having completed his term as vice president, Burr’s prospects in the East

seemed blighted, but his motives for a seven-month tour that touched nearly every western state and territory were unclear. According to Hinde, Burr seemed to “[fly] from point to point,” making “transient calls,” and preserving a “profound Silence” about his plans. Public attention fixed upon this prominent visitor. “Some Conjectured One thing, and some another,” with many convinced “that [Burr] was projecting some plan for future political operations.”⁴

Hinde’s story did not follow Burr back across the mountains that fall. Instead, it shifted to the arrival of John Wood and Joseph M. Street in Kentucky. In the summer of 1806, Wood and Street began publishing a newspaper in Frankfort called the *Western World*. They immediately created a stir by attacking prominent westerners “as having been Concerned in a Spanish intrigue or association for the separation of Kentucky from Virginia and the Union” two decades earlier. While their exposé of the so-called Spanish Conspiracy implicated most of the state’s leading Republicans, it particularly targeted James Wilkinson—the ranking general of the United States Army, the governor of the Louisiana Territory, and a longtime intimate of Burr’s. The *Western World*’s revelations about the old Spanish Conspiracy and hints about a new conspiracy that involved many of the same men “agitated the whole Western Country.”⁵

“It was amidst these Convulsions,” Hinde recalled, that Burr returned that summer, producing great “consternation among the good people of the Western region.” An early stop was the island home of the wealthy Irish immigrant Harman Blennerhassett, which was in the Ohio River near Marietta. In Marietta, Burr and Blennerhassett contracted for boats and supplies. After Burr continued his travels, Blennerhassett published a series of essays as “Querist” in a Marietta newspaper. The essays’ frank discussion of the wisdom of dissolving the federal union and erecting “an extensive and distinct Empire in the West” caught the public’s attention. After their appearance, Burr’s movements through Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee were closely watched, and Hinde himself sprang into action. When Wood failed “to attack the plan of Burr and his associates” in the *Western World*, Hinde began publishing his own essays in a Chillicothe, Ohio, newspaper as “The Fredonian.” In his essays, Hinde “disclos[ed] the whole Operations and gave regular Sketches of every movement.” In early 1807, he purchased

another Chillicothe newspaper, which had been “in Burrs employ,” renamed it the *Fredonian*, and turned it “like a battery” upon Burr and his supporters.⁶

According to Hinde’s history, it took until the fall of 1806 for information about Burr’s activities and plans to reach the Jefferson administration. One source was John Graham, who had been sent west by Jefferson “to fathom the plan, & to place the State Authorities on their Guard.” Hinde met Graham in mid-November and gave him “Sufficient information to enable him to make a report.” The other important source of information was Wilkinson, who, as Hinde recalled, exposed Burr’s plans in a letter to Jefferson of “the 21st day of October 1806.” This letter had been written from the Orleans Territory, where Wilkinson and his soldiers faced Spanish troops across the disputed border. Samuel Swartwout, a young protégé of Burr’s, had visited Wilkinson at his camp, bearing letters from Burr that “were written in Cypher[,] the Key to [which],” Hinde remembered, “was Endicks Dictionary.”⁷ Even though rumors of Burr’s project had circulated for months, it was only after Wilkinson deciphered these letters that he alerted the administration.

Like many of his contemporaries, Hinde believed that Wilkinson had once been a party to Burr’s plans, as had other western military men, including former United States senators John Adair of Kentucky and Andrew Jackson of Tennessee. Hinde traced Wilkinson’s break with Burr to two sources. While the cipher letter stated that Wilkinson “was to be Second” only to Burr, Hinde did not think that such an arrangement could have satisfied the general, whose “maxim” was said to be, “like Lucifer[’s, that] He had rather ‘reign in Hell’ than ‘Serve in Heaven!’” Wilkinson would have expected, instead, “to be *supported* by Col Burr with his ‘hosts of choice spirits,’” while he “remain[ed] as first in Command.” Hinde also attributed Wilkinson’s defection to his shock at the full extent of Burr’s plans, which had been explained in “verbal Communications” from Swartwout and another of Burr’s couriers, Justus Erich Bollman. As these men unfolded “the plan of future Operations, the besieging of the City of New Orleans and the Seizure on the deposits (about one or two million of dollars) in the Bank of the UStates,” Hinde surmised, they “alarmed the fears of Genl. W at so high handed a measure.”⁸

Even as suspicions grew, Burr and his agents, according to Hinde, continued to build support for their “Conspiracy *plot*, or *intrigue*, (or whatever name it be called by).” Burr’s recruiters “were numerous and powerful.” They kept lists of the men “in every town or Hamlet” who supported or opposed him. They also tried to secure arms and men by winning over army and militia officers at western posts and towns. Burr himself worked diligently “to enlist the feelings of the youth of the Country”; his “fascinating manners,” as Hinde recalled, were “well calculated to win [their] affections.”⁹ Hinde even admitted that he had nearly been won over by Burr as they rode together one day that fall.

In the midst of these efforts, in November and December 1806, “Col Burr was [twice] arrested” by Joseph Hamilton Daveiss, the federal district attorney for Kentucky. Many of Kentucky’s most prominent Republicans defended Burr, who insisted that his projects would advance the nation’s interests. When Daveiss failed to secure an indictment, Burr’s local popularity soared. But success in Kentucky was quickly followed by a setback in Ohio. In early December, the state government moved to seize “Burrs flotilla at Marietta.” When combined with the probability of a war with Spain on the western border and “the plausibility of Col B’s aiding Gnl Wilkinson [and] his plans [having] the Sanction of Government,” the contradictory developments in Kentucky and Ohio left the public “in a state of uncertainty.” This confusion was dispelled by the arrival of a presidential proclamation against the western conspiracy in mid-December. After reading Jefferson’s proclamation, no one could doubt that the administration opposed Burr’s project. It soon became easy, Hinde remembered, “to distinguish the *partizans* of Burr from the Citizens friendly to the *peace* and *permanency* of our *Union*.”¹⁰

Hinde’s narrative ended there, with much of the story of the Burr Conspiracy left untold. From his perspective, after “the arm of Government” had moved to quell the conspiracy, “all the [subsequent] transactions [were] matters of [public] record” that did not require his particular evidence. Thus, Hinde’s account for Madison did not include the movement of Burr’s men and boats down the Ohio, Cumberland, and Mississippi Rivers, nor the steps taken by Wilkinson to defend New Orleans, nor the weeks waiting for western news in Washington, nor the abortive trial of Burr in the Mississippi Territory, nor Burr’s arrest

in the wilderness above Spanish Mobile, nor his celebrated trial and stunning acquittal in the court of Chief Justice John Marshall in Richmond, nor his self-imposed exile in Europe. Beyond noting that “many innocent persons” who had “associated with Col Burr” were long viewed with suspicion, Hinde said little about the crisis’s lingering effects on Burr, Wilkinson, Jefferson, or the many subordinate figures who had played parts in the drama.¹¹

Hinde’s narratives of the Burr Conspiracy, whether written for Madison or others, coupled what was, in many ways, a very narrow view of past events with a very broad sense of their continuing relevance. Each of his accounts related events almost entirely from his own point of view. So much of Hinde’s story concerned his own actions that he became the protagonist rather than Burr. When he included information from beyond his own experience, he usually identified his sources. Many were friends or acquaintances; but Hinde also referred to Wilkinson’s 21 October 1806 letter to Jefferson and to the cipher letter from Burr to Wilkinson. The vicissitudes of human memory and authorial selection also made Hinde’s account distinct. Only he seems to have cared, for instance, that Burr’s western tour of 1805 coincided with a travelling “exhibition of Wax figures representing the fatal *duel*” with Hamilton.¹² Within these limits, however, Hinde wrote for larger purposes, not merely for self-serving ends. Believing that an accurate account of the conspiracy was still needed decades after the event, he worked to record and publicize aspects of it that might otherwise be lost. Between 1825 and 1843, he sent a file of old newspaper essays to the State Department, prepared two versions of his story for Madison, and had his narrative and other documents published in the *Daily National Intelligencer* and the *American Pioneer*. And Hinde hoped that his tale could serve didactic purposes as the country seemingly moved away from its founding principles. “Let not the attempts of . . . almost beardless boys of the west, who overturned the great western conspiracy, be buried in oblivion,” he charged the editors of the *Intelligencer* in 1838. With a new “conspiracy” threatening to bring a slaveholding Texas into the union, Hinde hoped that publishing his narrative would inspire “our youths [to] *unite* and save their country.”¹³

This book examines the much-studied Burr Conspiracy from a new perspective, focusing more on the crisis and on the efforts to make

sense of the conspiracy than on the conspiracy itself. What makes a crisis a crisis is not a particular series of events or state of affairs, but the relationship of those developments and conditions to a people's existing hopes and fears. Barely four decades after the Declaration of Independence, and not even two decades after the Constitution, that embodied many of their aspirations, Americans felt great anxiety not just about whether their political institutions could survive, but also about whether they were one people who could live together as one nation. Between the spring of 1805 and the winter of 1807, the Burr Conspiracy, and the response to it, seemed to imperil their hopes for an independent, republican, united, and expanding country. And it inflamed their fears of foreign influence and domestic strife, of a shattered union and a failed republic. These fears showed people what might happen and, in doing so, helped them make sense of what was happening.¹⁴ They not only generated the air of crisis, but also fixed, for many at the time, the nature of the conspiracy itself in a way that the vague rumors, incomplete reports, and conflicting claims about Burr's intentions and actions could not.

Rather than retelling the story *of* the Burr Conspiracy, this book focuses upon the stories *about* the Burr Conspiracy that were told at the time and over the next few decades. These stories appeared in rumors and conversations, in diaries and letters, in newspaper articles and magazine essays, in pamphlets and books, and even in presidential messages and judicial rulings. Some represented little more than an effort to sort through uncertain information and events; they were written for their authors and, perhaps, a few readers. But others embodied a belief that, properly told, the story of Burr's or Wilkinson's or Jefferson's intentions and actions could serve various ends. Some influenced later stories; others had little lasting impact. Taken together, the stories point to the various forces that influenced how people at the time worked through conflicting accounts to decide what to believe—to the uncomfortable but growing impact of political partisanship and the consoling but diminishing force of public reputation, to the alarming prospects of disunion and tyranny and the tenuous balancing of local, state, regional, and national identities. In doing so, they reveal a people who were struggling to make sense of themselves and their world.¹⁵

Thomas Spotswood Hinde's story of the Burr Conspiracy was just one of many—differing from any other almost by necessity, yet sharing important characteristics with nearly all of the rest. No one else wrote, or could have written, precisely his story for precisely his reasons. But Hinde's account shared some basic characteristics with almost all of the narratives of the conspiracy that were prepared, at the time and afterward, by those who had experienced it. Like Hinde, most authors wrote about themselves as well as about Burr. Like Hinde, they tried to establish their veracity by naming their sources and citing, or even including, supporting documents. Like Hinde, they wanted to preserve what they viewed as an accurate statement of events, yet, as with Hinde, not all of what they wrote was accurate. And, like Hinde, they recognized that the story of the Burr Conspiracy, if properly constructed and employed, could serve a wide range of purposes: personal, partisanal, local, regional, and national.

Hinde's narrative differed most strikingly from many other accounts in the certainty with which he related Burr's plans. For Hinde, there was no question that Burr intended to divide the union at the Appalachians. All of the other plans that were attributed to Burr—launching an illegal invasion of Spanish Mexico, organizing a volunteer company in case of a declared war against Spain, winning election to Congress from a western state or territory, building a canal around the falls of the Ohio at Louisville, Kentucky, or settling the so-called Bastrop Grant on the Ouachita River in the Louisiana Purchase—were merely cover for his real purpose. Hinde's certainty had not developed gradually in the two decades after the Burr crisis, moreover, but had shaped his earliest essays in the *Scioto Gazette* and the *Fredonian*.¹⁶ Many of Hinde's contemporaries, in contrast, described Burr's plans and actions as “enveloped in mystery.” In letters, diaries, and newspapers, this phrase appeared repeatedly as men and women tried to make sense of the swirling rumors and conflicting reports about Burr. At the peak of the crisis, in late 1806 and early 1807, it is not surprising that “Colonel Burr's mysterious movements” prompted such language.¹⁷ But many continued to express uncertainty about Burr's plans even after the crisis had abated. To Abigail Adams, for example, Burr's “projects” were “enveloped in as many Mystery as Mrs. Ratcliffs castle of udolphus” as late as mid-March.¹⁸ Burr's trial in Richmond brought countless,

well-publicized revelations in the summer and fall of 1807. But, for many, the confusion persisted. One traveller in the West that fall reported that, despite all of the information that he had “been able to collect, this affair still remains enveloped in a *cloud of mystery*.”¹⁹

Contemporaries did not wonder only about Burr’s intentions. There were a number of “enigma’s” that, as one New Yorker put it, they could “not unriddle.”²⁰ Who else knew and supported his plans? Did General Wilkinson? Did other officers or enlisted men in the army and navy? Did the administration itself? Why had so many men across the backcountry and the West, from upstate New York to New Orleans, seemingly been willing to join him? How much support did Burr have in the East? Who had funded his purchases of boats and supplies? Was a foreign power behind Burr’s project? If so, was it Great Britain, Spain, or France? Contemporaries assumed that numerous people, not just Burr, could answer their questions. If some of them would simply “confess and forsake their evil designs,” an Ohioan insisted, “they [could] unveil to the world the whole mistery, and we should not now be left to conjecture who the accomplices of Burr were, or what were their designs.”²¹ As the crisis ebbed, many people even hoped, in the words of the secretary of war, “that the conspirators should so far commit themselves, as to leave no possible doubt of their real intentions.”²²

For two centuries, biographers and historians have puzzled over the same questions about the Burr Conspiracy that troubled contemporaries. These questions, for the most part, concern the thought processes of a relatively small number of men who were in positions to shape events—Burr, Wilkinson, and Jefferson, most obviously, but also Chief Justice Marshall, a handful of Burr’s leading supporters, and a number of federal and state officials who acted to defeat Burr’s plans.²³ Answering such questions with any degree of confidence requires reliable documentary evidence, but, more than for other major public events of two centuries past, the documentary record for the Burr Conspiracy is both incomplete and unreliable. It has certainly suffered from all of the expected problems and losses: the letters that are undated or illegible, damaged or unattributable; the documents that have been forgotten in an attic or misfiled in an archive or burned in a fire; and the papers that were destroyed, often late in life, by the person who had amassed them or, soon after death, by a surviving spouse or descendant.

But the particular nature of this event created additional gaps as those involved, or merely implicated, sought to protect themselves or others. At Marietta, for example, the men on one boat that had come down the Ohio from Pittsburgh “burn[ed] their papers . . . , while the other [boat] was undergoing an examination” by the militia.²⁴ In New Orleans, one suspect “threw all his papers into the fire” when soldiers arrived to arrest him.²⁵ Others surely responded in the same manner as federal, state, and territorial officials sought those connected with Burr. Even years later, Joseph Hamilton Daveiss’s brother burned a file of papers that had been “prepared fully and accurately enough to have convicted Colonel Burr” rather than embarrass “the descendents of the men who had been implicated in Burr’s conspiracy.”²⁶

The most significant problems for historians and biographers who try to answer the questions that were asked by contemporaries surround the three men—Burr, Wilkinson, and Jefferson—who were at the center of the crisis. In Jefferson’s case, the difficulty only occasionally arises from missing documents. Jefferson took great pains to preserve his incoming and outgoing correspondence. Early in his public life, he began recording his outgoing letters by making press copies of the freshly written pages; by the time of the Burr crisis, he was also using a polygraph machine that made a second copy of each letter as he wrote. From 1783 until his death in 1826, moreover, he kept a daily log of letters sent and received “with such exactness,” he remarked in 1808, “that I do not recollect ever to have detected a single omission.”²⁷ And, although his papers were scattered after his death, most of them have made it to the Library of Congress and a few other archives. While one can find significant gaps in Jefferson’s papers regarding the Burr Conspiracy, including some of the first letters that brought it to his attention, greater obstacles arise from the sometimes-loose relationship between what he thought and what he wrote. As a public figure, Jefferson always understood that his private letters and public statements shaped their readers’ impressions not just of himself, but of his principles, his administration, and his country. This awareness led him to write things to some people and on some occasions that can only be seen as deliberate lies and that were occasionally denounced as such at the time. Some of the people who were most likely to receive Jefferson’s true thoughts on political matters were members of his

cabinet. But, as they were with him during the Burr crisis, most of his exchanges with them went unrecorded. Given such obstacles, can we confidently answer the questions that have most interested biographers and historians about Jefferson: Did he have prior knowledge of Burr's plans? Why did he respond to the conspiracy as he did? And did he truly believe, as he announced to Congress, that Burr's guilt of treason could not be questioned?²⁸

The documentary record regarding Wilkinson poses different problems. His voluminous official papers are scattered through numerous National Archives collections; his vast personal correspondence is spread among dozens of repositories. Wilkinson also published extensively in newspapers, pamphlets, and books, and he often wrote anonymously or pseudonymously, though his "inimitable" style, as one of his enemies described it, "[set] forgery at defiance."²⁹ But assembling the relevant sources is just part of the problem. For years, Wilkinson lived a double life—a top general in the United States Army and a paid spy in the Spanish service. This situation made him cautious whenever he put pen to paper, even with those who considered themselves his most trusted confidants. He was also supremely attuned to slights to his honor and threats to his reputation. And he knew well the various tools that could be used to control how he would be seen by contemporaries and historians. He had unsigned letters, often written by himself or his subordinates, placed in local and distant newspapers. He arranged public testimonials to himself. He salted the official records with his own reports, often bolstered with depositions and enclosures, that he could call for if needed. He altered other people's letters, including the famous cipher letter, before making them public. And, in the fall of 1807, he even managed to remove a dozen of his letters to the president from "the bundle of papers respecting Burr" that had been assembled over the previous year.³⁰ When a congressional committee investigated the general's ties to Burr in 1811, it had to rely upon his copies of those letters. Given Wilkinson's double life and his extensive manipulations of the documentary record, how can we answer with confidence the questions that have always surrounded him: How much had he known of Burr's project before receiving the cipher letter? How deeply had he committed himself to it? And why did he move so aggressively against Burr and Burr's supporters after disclosing it to the president?

That Burr's most important papers from the period of the conspiracy were lost when the ship carrying his only daughter from South Carolina to New York sank in early 1813 is widely accepted. That account seems to have originated with Burr's first biographer, Samuel L. Knapp, in the mid-1830s; there are good reasons to doubt it. It seems clear that relevant Burr papers were available after that tragedy. Some items were scattered, but Burr's second biographer and literary executor, Matthew Livingston Davis, described the surviving correspondence in his possession from just the first eight months of 1806 as "voluminous."³¹ Little of that material is available to modern scholars. Some was stolen; some was distributed as souvenirs. Some was deliberately destroyed; some was accidentally burned. The editors of Burr's *Political Correspondence and Public Papers* (1983) printed just ten outgoing, and no incoming, letters from those months. It is not just that so much of Burr's correspondence has been lost. What survives is often shrouded in uncertainty. Even the cipher letter, which was long viewed as the clearest statement of Burr's intentions, has been cast into doubt as scholars have questioned whether he wrote it. Other Burr letters exist only in the form that Wilkinson published as he tried to exonerate himself. Burr, moreover, seemed to many to be "one of the most guarded & reserved men," someone who could "talk by the hour without ever letting out his opinion."³² In both correspondence and conversation, one of his former Senate colleagues reflected, his language was often "covert & indefinite."³³ Such habits make it difficult to discover Burr's intentions in what does survive—accounts of conversations with Burr or Burr's supporters and the writings of those supporters. Instead, this material forms a mass of conflicting evidence. Knowing that much of Burr's own writings from this period has disappeared, uncertain about how much to trust those few items that survive, and aware that the accounts of those who spoke with him or his supporters may be misleading and definitely are conflicting, how can we answer the critical questions: Did Burr intend to divide the union? Were any plans against Spanish Mexico contingent upon a declaration of war? And did he expect to add any conquests that he made at Spain's expense to the United States or to form them into a nation under his own control?

Burr's and Wilkinson's and Jefferson's contemporaries needed to ask and to answer these questions in a way that we, more than two

centuries later, do not. They needed to make enough sense of the uncertain rumors, the differing reports, and the conflicting charges to act, even if their actions extended only to supporting or opposing, approving or criticizing, the more consequential actions of others. Like us, they were usually attempting to make sense of things that had already happened—past events that were described in conversations and letters, newspapers and pamphlets, presidential messages, congressional debates, and judicial opinions. But, for them, those events also felt like a part of the present because they seemed to invite or to require action in a way that they do not for us. As people so often must, they decided what to do and what not to do, what to support and what to oppose, with far less information than they wanted or even felt that they needed. In the midst of a crisis that was, in some ways, caused by their own uncertainty, they had to construct histories—stories about the past—from incomplete and incorrect information even as history—the events that become the past—was being made based upon those stories.

Sensemaking is a basic human activity, one that exists across time and space. But it is also profoundly shaped by historically specific political, social, and cultural forces. By changing our questions, by trying to understand how Americans experienced the Burr crisis and how they made sense of the Burr Conspiracy as it happened and in the decades that followed rather than to discover exactly what Jefferson or Wilkinson or Burr thought, we can discern these forces at work. In doing so, we will arrive at a story that is necessarily different from one that again tries to answer the old questions. But the new story can actually tell us much more about the early American republic. In examining how vague rumors and uncertain reports about Burr's plans and actions became a crisis, we see the continuing fears about the fragility of the federal union, the instability of republican governments, and the uncertainty of American nationalism. In exploring how people made sense of the Burr Conspiracy, we see them struggling to understand themselves at a time when the rapid political changes of the past forty years rested uneasily on more stable cultural forms.

After an opening chapter on the institutional and cultural forces that shaped the movement of information in the early nineteenth century, this book approaches how people experienced the Burr crisis and

how they made sense of the Burr Conspiracy from a number of different angles. Four “interludes”—which use specific events to explore how sense was made, contested, and remade during the Burr crisis and beyond—divide the book into three parts. Each part includes chapters that examine the crisis from three different perspectives. In each part, one chapter highlights the importance of place. Local battles for political and social power produced very different reactions to Burr, Wilkinson, and Jefferson in central Kentucky and western Pennsylvania, New Orleans and Natchez, and Richmond and Philadelphia. Examining these locally divergent understandings exposes the extent and nature of political partisanship, the reach of federal power and authority, the expectations for personal behavior that were shaped by class, gender, and culture, and the struggles over the political and social order of the new nation. Another chapter in each part investigates the power of specific stories. A few narratives—one of Jefferson’s messages to Congress, the cipher letter, a part of an argument at Burr’s trial in Richmond—proved especially influential in helping people make sense of the Burr Conspiracy. Their explanatory power, at the time and later, bore little relationship to their factual accuracy. The remaining chapter in each part considers the use of preexisting stories as analogies to comprehend current events. Ancient and modern history, Europe’s and their own, told Americans how their union might shatter, how their republic might fall, and what kinds of men might bring about such horrors. Stories of the Mississippi Crisis and the American Revolution, of Catiline and Napoleon, of wild bachelors and grasping aristocrats provided structure for ordering the chaos of conflicting accounts and explanations; they both fueled the sense of crisis and helped to make sense of it. The closing chapter examines the final words on the Burr Conspiracy of the three principal figures—Burr, Wilkinson, and Jefferson.

The Burr Conspiracy never resulted in a battle between what were often called “Burr’s men” and federal troops or state or territorial militiamen in the streets of New Orleans or in the swamps of the Mississippi Territory or even, despite the administration’s charges, on the shores of Blennerhassett Island. Instead, the battles were fought through partisan newspapers and personal defense pamphlets, in assembly chambers and in courtrooms, on street corners and in taverns, and even on dueling grounds. Some, perhaps many, of these battles

raged without leaving any trace for us to study. Others, though, produced the myriad of sources that we can use to establish not what Burr or Wilkinson or Jefferson really thought, but what they and others wanted people at the time and after to think and how their contemporaries and later generations came to understand the Burr Conspiracy. By looking beyond the three principals, we can see, for a specific time and place, how people understand and explain their experiences, how they take public events and turn them to their own purposes, as well as how contemporary narratives shape historical reconstructions. These efforts to comprehend and to shape the story of the Burr Conspiracy cannot be related within a single, chronological narrative. Information moved slowly and reached different people in different orders and at different times. While this book proceeds in a basically chronological fashion, it shifts among various levels of investigation—sometimes telling the story of the crisis itself, sometimes examining contemporary stories about the conspiracy, and sometimes discussing later reconstructions of the story by biographers and historians, including myself.³⁴ “Uncovering the Story of an Early American Crisis,” the subtitle of this book, thus has a dual meaning, representing both my effort to uncover the story of the Burr Conspiracy for my readers and my examination of how those who lived through the Burr crisis made sense of it for themselves and for others.