

AMBITION & BONDAGE
An Inquiry on Alexander Hamilton and Slavery
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Of the founding fathers of our nation, none has attracted a more peculiar sense of mystery and controversy than Alexander Hamilton. Precocious, vigorously outspoken, and limitlessly ambitious, Hamilton polarized the opinions of his contemporaries, earning admirers of his revolutionary political and financial ideas as well as lifelong political adversaries, averse to his contentious writings and personality. Most works on Hamilton focus on his role in George Washington's inner circle during the American Revolution and the beginning of the American republic, his influential interpretations of the United States Constitution, his foundation of the American financial system, and his role in introducing partisanship into the early American political system. However, Hamilton also retained a complicated relationship with the institution of slavery in the fledgling United States. Hamilton's biographers praise him for being a public abolitionist, but his position on slavery is more complex than his most prominent biographers (including Ron Chernow, Willard Randall, and Richard Brookhiser) suggest. Careful research indicates that Hamilton detested the institution of slavery with fervor, but whenever the issue of slavery came into conflict with Hamilton's central political tenet of property rights, his belief in the promotion of American interests, or his own personal ambition, Hamilton allowed these motivations to override his aversion to slavery.

The persistent conflict between Hamilton's ambition and ideology was born of the social complexity of his early life, during his childhood in St. Croix and his early adulthood in the city of New York, before Hamilton left King's College to join General George Washington's camp during the American Revolution. This conflict can be illustrated by examining Hamilton's influencers, including his patrons who helped to fund his departure from St. Croix and his tuition at Elizabethtown Academy and eventually King's College. Hamilton's later public opinion on slavery as a prominent New York statesman would ultimately be shaped in the early years of his

manhood. The private life and mind of Hamilton is left for historians to speculate on from Hamilton's private writings, but pieces of the public mind of the United States' first Treasury secretary can be understood by scrutinizing the young Hamilton's relationship with slavery. By analyzing Hamilton's experiences with slavery in his childhood and adolescence in St. Croix and his young adulthood at Elizabethtown and King's, Hamilton's private struggle and eventual public relationship with slavery becomes clearer.

Hamilton's attitude towards the institution of slavery found its initial grounding amid his upbringing on the Caribbean island of St. Croix. Personal tragedy and economic squalor plagued young Hamilton's life. The personal records that remain of Hamilton's childhood and adolescence lack substantial information about Hamilton's early character and disposition. The few specific facts of young Hamilton's childhood are gleaned from legal records. Hamilton was born out of wedlock on the island of Nevis in 1755, the son of James Hamilton and Rachel Fawcett Lavien. When he moved to St. Croix is unclear, but it is certain that James Hamilton left the family early in Hamilton's childhood. Already a social outcast as a bastard, Hamilton's childhood became even more difficult when his mother Rachel died in 1768, when Hamilton was twelve years old. Here, Hamilton experienced his first direct contact with the institution of slavery, as Rachel left her orphaned son the remainder of her property, including a slave boy named Ajax. Hamilton and his brother James Jr., however, did not receive any of their inheritance because of their illegitimate birth¹. Though Hamilton did not become an early slaveholder, his childhood in St. Croix, an island where only 2,000 of its 24,000 inhabitants were white², exposed Hamilton fully to the trials and tribulations of plantation slavery, as the operations of the Caribbean sugar industry was wholly dependent on the institution. Coming of

¹ "Probate Court Transaction on Estate of Rachel Levien." Manuscript. (St. Croix, 1768). National Archives, Washington.

² Brookhiser, Richard. *Hamilton, American*. (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 18.

age within a slave society and observing its daily practice influenced the young Hamilton – as a social outcast himself, Hamilton may have in some ways identified with the slave’s depressed and despised position in West Indian society³. Hamilton witnessed firsthand the intense struggles that plantation slaves faced, and began to loathe the institution of slavery through this direct exposure.

Despite the misfortunes of his early childhood, the ambition of Hamilton started to burgeon along with his considerable talents. At the age of twelve, Hamilton wrote his earliest documented letter to his childhood friend Edward Stevens, then a student at King’s College in New York City, in which Hamilton admits his frustrations at his limited opportunity on the island of St. Croix. His ambition was such “that I contemn the grov’ling and condition of a Clerk or the like, to which my Fortune &c. condemns me and would willingly risk my life tho’ not my Character to exalt my station”⁴. Hamilton did find outlets for his boundless precocity in St. Croix – in the late 1760s, the import-export business of Beekman & Cruger in Christiansted hired the young Hamilton as a clerk, providing him a window to the outside world by placing him in the environment of trading ships and fluctuating markets. The firm traded every conceivable commodity necessary for planters⁵, and the handling of foreign coin and the successful execution of imports provided Hamilton with a priceless education that would inform his later writings on the American economy. Hamilton’s model at the firm, Nicholas Cruger, was a member of a prominent colonial New York family. His father, Henry, was a wealthy merchant, shipowner, and member of His Majesty’s Royal Council for the province, and his uncle John was a long-

³ Hendrickson, Robert A. *The Rise and Fall of Hamilton* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1981), 42.

⁴ Hamilton, Alexander. “Letter to Edward Stevens, 1767.” Hamilton Papers. Manuscript. Library of Congress, Washington.

⁵ Cruger, Henry and John. Waste Book, June 1762 -- January 1768. Manuscript. (New-York Historical Society, New York).

standing royal mayor for New York City⁶. Despite these official connections, Nicholas Cruger eventually expressed sympathy for the rebel American colonists and openly revered George Washington. Historians believe that Cruger served not only as a professional mentor but also as an early political mentor to the young Hamilton; Cruger furnished a direct route to Hamilton's future home in New York City by exposing the young Hamilton to his mainland connections through the operations of Beekman & Cruger. When Nicholas Cruger fell ill for months in 1771, Cruger left the operations of the entire St. Croix branch of Beekman & Cruger to the fourteen year-old Hamilton⁷.

The Waste & Account Book of the Cruger family reveals that they mainly dealt with merchant commodities, but on occasion the firm and family did engage in the African slave trade. Hamilton, through his employment, witnessed the cramped conditions of slave ships, where hundreds of Africans were chained in fetid holds – the conditions on the ships were said to be so vile that people onshore on St. Croix could smell the foul effluvia from miles away. The Cruger firm advertised in the *Royal Danish American Gazette*, the local bilingual newspaper of St. Croix, that the firm had “just imported from the windward coast of Africa, and to be sold on Monday next, by Messrs. Kortwright & Cruger, At said Cruger's yard, Three Hundred Prime SLAVES”⁸. The purchasers of these slaves were not allowed in until the “merchandise” had been well rubbed with oil “in order to make them look sleek and handsome,” a task which was surely left to Hamilton and other caretakers of goods. A year later, Hamilton was involved in selling the cargo of the Dutch Indiaman ship *Venus*, which endured a rough journey from the African Gold Coast, arriving in the port of Christiansted in poor condition. Nicholas Cruger complained that

⁶ Cruger, Henry and John. Letter Book, June 1767 -- August 1768. Manuscript. (New-York Historical Society, New York).

⁷ Chernow, Ron. *Hamilton*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 31.

⁸ Chernow, Ron. *Hamilton*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 32.

the 250 slaves onboard were “very indifferent indeed, sickly, and thin.” They brought an average of 30 pounds each, less than the value of a healthy mule⁹. Though Hamilton executed the *Venus* trade with his usual efficiency, it was an operation he openly detested¹⁰. Whether or not Hamilton wanted to engage with slavery on the island of St. Croix or not, the laws issued from the parent government in Copenhagen compelled him to due to his status as a white male. According to the “St. Croixian Pocket Companion,” a booklet outlining the duties of whites on the island, every male over the age of sixteen was required to serve in the militia and be at the ready with muskets if the central fort fired its guns twice. This militia service was mainly utilized to quell the minor slave revolts that occurred on the island. Hamilton saw how skittish planters lived in constant dread of slave revolts and continuously fortified their militia to avert them; even after Hamilton left for America, he carried with him a distaste for anarchy and disorder that came into conflict with Hamilton’s philosophical embrace of personal liberty. Hamilton’s exposure to the slave trade in St. Croix perhaps played an instrumental role in his eventual advocacy for a stronger central state – he detested the tyranny of the authoritarian rule of the plantation planters, yet also feared the potential revolts of dismissed slaves¹¹. The conflicting dichotomy of despotism and anarchy as a result of Hamilton’s exposure to Caribbean slave society would exhibit itself in his later writings on government and non-slave related matters.

Hamilton’s brilliant performance at Beekman & Cruger began to impress people with his intellectual promise. The reverend Hugh Knox, an evangelical Christian who served as an intellectual mentor to the young Hamilton, bestowed upon him Scottish Enlightenment ideals that advocated free will over predestination as the central tenant of evangelical Presbyterianism.

⁹ Flexner, James Thomas. *The Young Hamilton: A Biography*. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1978), 39

¹⁰ Austin, Ian Patrick. *Common Foundations of American and East Asian Modernisation: From Hamilton to Junichero Koizumi*. (Singapore: Select Books, 2009), 31.

¹¹ Chernow, Ron. *Hamilton*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 33.

Knox was Hamilton's first exposure to a strong religious argument against slavery¹². Shortly after a hurricane devastated much of Christiansted and St. Croix in 1772, Hamilton penned a letter to his father as a reflection to the destruction caused by the hurricane on the inhabitants of the Caribbean island. The reverend Hugh Knox caught wind of the letter and published it in the *Royal Danish American Gazette*. In the letter, Hamilton hurled affronts at the planter class of St. Croix for their failure to come to the aid of their fellow citizens of St. Croix – “O ye, who revel in affluence, see the afflictions of humanity and bestow your superfluity to ease them. Say not, we have suffered also, and thence withhold your compassion. What are your sufferings compared to those? Ye have still more than enough left. Act wisely. Succour the miserable and lay up a treasure in Heaven.”¹³ This jibe against the planter class shows Hamilton's aversion to the slave society of St. Croix, and perhaps suggests that his later feelings on slavery found grounds in economic jealousy along with than ideological and philosophical opposition. Despite his fundamental disapproval of the institution, Hamilton recognized nonetheless with this letter that the powerful elite of the island were almost universally slaveholders or slave traders.

The letter served as a springboard for Hamilton's ambition to escape the small town of Christiansted to further himself in society. The reverend Knox began arranging a scholarship to send Hamilton to New York City for an education. Recognizing Hamilton's intellectual potential, numerous citizens rallied to the cause. Wealthy merchants who had conducted business with Hamilton as a Beekman & Cruger clerk made contributions. Nicholas Cruger and his associate Cornelius Kortwright agreed to consign four annual “cargoes of West India produce” to be “sold and appropriated to the support of Hamilton.” One of the four annual cargoes most

¹² Austin, Ian Patrick. *Common Foundations of American and East Asian Modernisation: From Hamilton to Junichero Koizumi*. (Singapore: Select Books, 2009), 32.

¹³ Hamilton, Alexander. “To The Royal Danish American Gazzette.” Manuscript. National Historical Publication & Records Commission. National Archives, Online.

certainly included funds accrued from the sale of slaves and slave-produced goods, and therefore the Caribbean slave trade directly enhanced the social mobility of Hamilton. Another contributor to the fund, interestingly enough, was the probate judge who denied Hamilton's inheritance from his mother Rachel due to his illegitimate birth. In total, the reverend Knox had arranged pledges of 400 pounds, his estimate of the cost of four years' tuition, board, and transportation to the mainland of America¹⁴.

In early October 1772, Hamilton arrived in the port of Boston and started to soak in the complexities of colonial life in fledgling America. He arrived in New York City for the first time in early November, taking the biweekly Boston-New York stagecoach to the southern tip of Manhattan. His first stop was King's College, perched on a bluff overlooking the Hudson River between Barclay and Murray streets¹⁵ – though not a student just yet, he intended to visit his old friend Edward Stevens, to whom he wrote his first recorded letter in 1769. Hamilton had in his possession letters of recommendation and merit from Reverend Knox and Nicholas Cruger. Reverend Knox referred him to a Reverend John Rodgers, who recommended to Hamilton that he pursue a preparatory school education, though on an accelerated track so as to not exhaust his funds before even setting foot in college. Hamilton enrolled in Elizabethtown Academy in Elizabethtown, New Jersey with the recommendation of Reverend Rodgers. Hamilton hoped to enter the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University) after a few years of accelerated study at Elizabethtown.

Young Hamilton dove headfirst into his studies, attempting to absorb years of education within a few months. Though Hamilton was known to be voracious in his studies, often seen “pacing in the graveyard [of Elizabethtown], hour after hour, mumbling to himself with a book

¹⁴ Randall, Willard Sterne. *Hamilton: A Life*. (New York: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2003), 40.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 44.

in hand,¹⁶ he was not merely a pedant. Through his recommendations from Reverend Knox, Hamilton acquainted himself with the powerful families around the area, including those of Elias Boudinot and William Livingston.

The Boudinot manor, Boxwood Hall, is believed to be Hamilton's place of residence during his tenure at Elizabethtown, and he absorbed much of the philosophy that made Elias Boudinot a prominent member of the middle colonies' unofficial aristocracy. Boudinot was a successful lawyer and philanthropist, who by the time Hamilton joined the fireside family at Boxwood Hall had become a leader of the American Presbyterian Church and an influential member of Princeton's board of trustees. Most notably, Elias Boudinot was an early abolitionist, using his legal skills to defend slaves in court without demanding a fee¹⁷. Hamilton developed connections with a multitude of families during his time in New Jersey, but none so warmly and closely as the relationship he established with the Boudinot family. It is clear that the Boudinots influenced Hamilton to a higher degree than his other professional connections, perhaps because of the sympathy Elias and Alexander shared for the state of slaves in America.

At this time Hamilton also became conversant with the Livingston family through William Livingston. At Liberty Hall in Elizabethtown, the Livingston Manor, Hamilton received good meals and important introductions. It was at Liberty Hall that Hamilton mixed with some of the most prominent slave-owning families in the middle colonies – here he made the acquaintance of the Beekman family of New York City, the rest of the Livingston clan, the DeLancey family, and even the Schuyler family of Albany. It was at Liberty Hall that Hamilton met his future wife Elizabeth Schuyler¹⁸. Despite his distaste for slavery, Hamilton was

¹⁶ Flexner, James Thomas. *The Young Hamilton: A Biography*. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1978), 54.

¹⁷ Ibid, 54.

¹⁸ Flexner, James Thomas. *The Young Hamilton: A Biography*. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1978), 56.

compelled to flirt with the daughters of the American slave aristocracy. Whether he liked it or not, to wield the influence that these families exhibited in colonial America would accelerate Hamilton's path to achieving his own personal ambitions.

Upon completion of his accelerated course of study at Elizabethtown Academy, Hamilton sought to fulfill his original intention of entering the College of New Jersey. Armed with recommendations from two trustees of the college – William Livingston and Elias Boudinot – and the desire to conduct his studies at a “more republican” college, Hamilton met with the president of Princeton, the Scottish minister Dr. John Witherspoon. Hercules Mulligan, a New York merchant tailor acquainted with the Cruger family, accompanied Hamilton. Mulligan later recalled that Hamilton “stated that he wished to enter [the college] . . . with the understanding that he should be permitted to advance from Class to Class with as much rapidity as his exertions would enable him to do so.” Buoyed already by the stress of a previous Princeton student who completed his undergraduate degree in two years rather than four (ironically James Madison, Hamilton's future collaborator on *The Federalist*), Witherspoon “listened with great attention to so unusual a proposition from so young a person,” and turned Hamilton's request down¹⁹. Hamilton made the same request to King's College in New York, which took him on.

Historians dispute exactly when Hamilton enrolled as a student at King's – the records of Hamilton's collegiate contemporaries seem to vary as well. A copy of a manuscript from “The Matricula or Register of Admissions & of Graduations & of Officers employed in King's College in New York” displays Hamilton's name among those admitted in 1774, one among a class of 17²⁰. Robert Troup, Hamilton's lifelong friend and collegiate roommate during his time at King's College, recalled that he had acquainted himself with Hamilton “in the year 1773 at

¹⁹ Brookhiser, Richard. *Hamilton, American*. (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 21.

²⁰ “Matricula of King's College.” Manuscript. (New York, 1774). Columbia University Libraries, *Rare Book & Manuscript Library*.

King's, now Columbia College, in New York, where I was a student...when the General [Hamilton] entered College, he did it as a private student, and not by annexing himself to a particular class"²¹. Troup's word serves as an illustration of Hamilton's unorthodox approach to college education, a recollection of Hamilton's wish to finish his education on an independently accelerated track. Hercules Mulligan housed Hamilton in his family lodgings in New York City and recalled that Hamilton "enrolled King's College in the spring of 75 in the Sophomore Class"²². King's College in its infancy kept its official roster carelessly – *Matricula* could refer not only to matriculation into King's College, but perhaps also an indication of graduation or other collegiate landmarks. Hamilton was doubtless a "private student," as mentioned by Robert Troup, in the academic year of 1773-1774 and then formally entered King's, as per the *Matricula*, in 1774, perhaps as a sophomore, as recalled by Hercules Mulligan.

King's College was located in "the most beautiful site for a college in the world"²³ on an elevated plateau bounded by today's West Broadway, Murray, Barclay, and Church Streets. Across the street from King's was the red-light district of New York, where as much as 2% of the total population of the city patrolled the dusky lanes each evening, offering their "services" to wary King's students. President Myles Cooper, an Anglican royalist, sought to sequester his students from external New York as much as possible for these reasons.

New York proved to be an altogether different environment for American slavery than St. Croix – mainly household slaves resided within the city, and slaves made up a fifth of a population of 25,000. Hamilton loved New York immediately as he found its trade and immigrant-oriented world familiar, a merging of his previous homes in Christiansted and

²¹ Troup, Robert. "Robert Troup to John Mason, March 22, 1810." Hamilton Papers. Manuscript. Library of Congress, Washington.

²² Mulligan, Hercules. "Narrative of Hercules Mulligan in the City of New York." Hamilton Papers. Manuscript. Library of Congress, Washington.

²³ Chernow, Ron. *Hamilton*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 49-50.

Elizabethtown. At King's, Hamilton encountered peers who had brought their household slaves to the college – most notably John “Jacky” Parker Custis, who was sent by his step-father General George Washington to King's in 1773 in hopes of curbing Jacky's penchant for indecent behavior. Accompanying Jacky was his slave, Joe, who lived in lodgings provided by King's with his master²⁴. King's College in Hamilton's time operated on an endowment that was underwritten by slavery – sixteen slave merchants of the city served as trustees of King's College before the Revolution. The slaving activities of the trustees are clear even after gleaning details from incomplete and damaged records of the New York treasurer's reports. Hamilton had arrived on a campus that had essentially been built by the operations and donations of slave merchants²⁵.

Hamilton dove headfirst into his studies and student life at King's, devoting his mental and spiritual faculties to King's libraries and college chapel. Hamilton initially enrolled in the equivalent of modern day pre-medical courses to start his education as an aspiring physician. Robert Troup's records indicate that Hamilton “attended anatomical lectures of Dr. Clossy in the College”²⁶. Hamilton's classmates noted his deep devotion to religious ideals – Robert Troup called his roommate as “a zealous believer in the fundamental doctrines of Christianity”²⁷, and several of Hamilton's classmates would note his attention to public worship and his habit of “praying on his knees night and morning”²⁸. Hamilton started to stray from his medical studies as he partook in courses in political philosophy, voraciously reading Locke, Hobbes, Montesquieu, Hume, Blackstone, Grotius, and Samuel von Pufendorf, from whom particularly Hamilton

²⁴ Wilder, Craig. *Ebony & Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities*. (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013), 136

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 49-68.

²⁶ Miner, Dwight. *Robert Troup's Diary*. Manuscript.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Chernow, Ron. *Hamilton*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 53

absorbed a keen sense of natural law and its relationship to human freedom²⁹. Hamilton's deep spiritual pursuit coupled with his sudden fascination with Enlightenment writers compelled him to engage with the political issues of his time, even as a young student at King's. Hamilton came to King's as a monarchist – Troup noted that Hamilton “was versed in the history of England and well acquainted with the principles of the English constitution, which he admired”³⁰. However, through weekly meetings of a self-made rhetoric society that included membership from Hamilton, Troup, and Edward Stevens, Hamilton's political disposition began to evolve, and Hamilton started to pen outspoken anti-British pieces. Using his peers in the rhetoric society to preview his essays, Hamilton began to lash out at British colonial rule through his writing, where he would compare the plight of revolutionary Americans to the condition of the black colonial slave. These pieces served as the early establishments of Hamilton's burgeoning reputation.

In the aftermath of the Boston Tea Party in 1773 and the subsequent Coercive Acts of 1774, revolutionary stirrings began to ripple all around the Atlantic colonies. Anti-British fervor began to appear in the generally Anglophile New York, which distracted Hamilton from his studies with rallies, petitions, broadsides, and handbills. The militant Sons of Liberty held a mass meeting on a grassy common near King's College in July 1774 to rally support for a boycott of British goods, a meeting that served as the soapbox for Hamilton's first public speech. Hamilton, energized by the gathered crowd, spoke out against the closure of Boston's port, endorsed colonial unity against unfair taxation, and came out for a boycott of British goods – he stated that inaction would allow “fraud, power, and the most odious oppression to rise triumphant over right, justice, social happiness, and freedom”³¹. Hamilton kept writing against the oppressive

²⁹ Ibid, 52.

³⁰ Flexner, James Thomas. *The Young Hamilton: A Biography*. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1978), 63.

³¹ Chernow, Ron. *Hamilton*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 55.

policies of the crown as the revolutionary effort began to take shape and the first Continental Congress made plans to gather. In December 1774, Hamilton published his first major essay, “A Full Vindication of the Measures of the Congress,” advertised in the *New-York Gazetteer*. “A Full Vindication” displayed Hamilton’s extensive education in history, philosophy, politics, economics, and law from King’s – he wielded the principles of Hume and von Pufendorf in an intellectually charged argument against British colonial rule. Most notably, the piece draws direct comparisons between black slaves and oppressed colonists, another affirmation of Hamilton’s deep disapproval of slavery. Hamilton declared in the piece his fundamental belief that “all men have one common origin: they participate in one common nature, and consequently have one common right,” and that there was no just reason that “one man should exercise any power, or pre-eminence, over his fellow creatures unless they have voluntarily vested him with it.” He continued to call on the farmers of the Atlantic to engage with their oppression, asking them if they are “willing then to be slaves without a single struggle? Will you give up your freedom, or, which is the same thing, will you resign all security for your life and property, rather than endure some small present inconveniencies? Will you not take a little trouble to transmit the advantages you now possess to those, who are to come after you?”³². Hamilton filled “A Full Vindication of the Measures of Congress” with explicit references to the condition of slavery in connection with the pamphlet’s target audience, the oppressed colonists of the American colonies, structured by the philosophies Hamilton absorbed from the library of King’s College. Hamilton’s critics, several of whom were wealthy Atlantic slave-owners, responded to “A Full Vindication” by rejecting the analogy between the condition of slaves and the condition of colonists. In his rebuttal to the criticism, titled “A Farmer Refuted,” Hamilton made no

³² Syrett, Harold and Jacob E. Cooke, eds. *The Papers of Hamilton*. Vol 1. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961-87).

mention of slavery whatsoever, instead focusing on rhetoric directly pertinent to the revolutionary cause³³.

New York came under the grip of revolutionary fever, and records of Hamilton's early exposure to slavery fade as the attention of the colonies began to focus on an impending skirmish with the British crown. In the spring of 1775, Hamilton famously distracted an angry, drunken, Patriot mob from seizing King's College's president Myles Cooper, who continued to harbor strong Loyalist sentiments³⁴. With the leadership of the College vacated, and the events of the Revolution snowballing, students at King's started to neglect their studies, many joining local New York militias and lending their assistance to the Revolutionary cause. Hamilton himself partook in a mission to drag artillery from Fort George (where it was in danger of being captured by British forces encroaching on Manhattan) back to King's, where the artillery was set safely under the liberty pole in the Common³⁵. Hamilton never graduated with a formal degree from King's College as it dissolved into a military hospital for patriot forces by April 1776.

Hamilton was barely twenty-one years, but the period characterized as his early life had largely ended. Seeking a more active role in the war to come, Hamilton enlisted in the Continental Army after serving some time with the New York militia Hearts of Oak. Through Hamilton's connections with prominent New Yorkers, the New York Provincial Congress eventually appointed Hamilton captain of the Provincial Company of the Artillery of NY in March 1776³⁶. After military successes at the Battle of White Plains and the Battle of Trenton, Hamilton found himself invited to become an aide to General George Washington, a post he accepted with excitement. Washington and Hamilton had complementary talents, values, and

³³ Ibid, 81-105.

³⁴ Chernow, Ron. *Hamilton*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 64.

³⁵ Ibid, 67.

³⁶ Miner, Dwight. *Miner Papers*. Manuscript.

opinions that made the pair far more than the sum of their parts, and Hamilton absorbed as much as he could from the General – never had he become so close with someone so influential. Washington utilized Hamilton’s superior rhetoric skills to his advantage, making Hamilton conduct all of Washington’s communications to Congress, state governors, and the most powerful generals in the Continental Army. Hamilton even began to pen some of Washington’s speeches, a trend that continued into Washington’s presidency³⁷. Washington owned over one hundred slaves on his plantation in Mount Vernon, a fact that Hamilton chose to overlook in his speeches and letters for General, then President Washington. Hamilton’s relationship with Washington exemplifies Hamilton prioritizing his personal ambition and influential connections over the distaste for slavery he had acquired in his early life. A close relationship to Washington, Hamilton saw, would reap political and social benefits in the long term, and Hamilton weighed that against his abhorrence for slavery.

Though Hamilton avoided discussing slavery with Washington at all costs for fear of alienating his mentor, Hamilton did urge Washington to enlist slaves in the Continental Army. Washington, partly due to his own racial views and partly in fear of alienating South Carolina and Georgia from the revolutionary effort, refused to enlist black men until Lord Dunmore, the governor of Virginia, offered slaves freedom for fighting against the colonists³⁸. Hamilton seized this opportunity to convince Washington to accept black soldiers fighting for the revolutionary cause. In a letter to John Jay, at the time the president of the Continental Congress, Hamilton argued that this action would “have to combat much opposition from prejudice and self-interest,” but hoped to prove “that the Negroes [would] make very excellent soldiers, with proper management.” Hamilton hoped that this measure would potentially pave a way to emancipation,

³⁷ Chernow, Ron. *Hamilton*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 89.

³⁸ Horton, James Oliver. “Hamilton: Slavery and Race in a Revolutionary Generations,” *New York: The New York Journal of American History* 3 (2004), 21.

and confessed this clandestine wish to Jay: “This circumstance, I confess, has no small weight in inducing me to wish the success of the project; for the dictates of humanity and true policy equally interest me in favor of this unfortunate class of men.” At a time where a large number of white men of power, including Hamilton’s contemporaries Thomas Jefferson and Washington, harbored deeply racist views, Hamilton denied the inferiority of the black race, speculating that “their natural faculties are as good as ours”³⁹, a remarkably progressive statement in the context of Hamilton’s era. Though Hamilton hoped that including black soldiers in the Continental Army could potentially serve as a pathway to gradual emancipation, this was not Hamilton’s primary goal in rallying support from Washington to enlist slaves for the revolutionary effort. Hamilton, ever the pragmatist, saw that enlisting slaves was essential to the revolutionary effort – if the 5,000 slaves who had joined the Continental Army had instead joined the thousands of colonial slaves flocking to the British Army, the manpower situation for the Continental Army would have been dire.

When the Revolutionary War ended, Hamilton served briefly in the Congress of the Confederation, resolving issues ranging from army protests to economic inequities from late 1782 to July 1783⁴⁰. Hamilton doubted Congress’ ability to govern the fledgling United States, and left his first stint in politics to go back to New York City. Upon return, Hamilton established a law practice and settled down in the city with his new wife Elizabeth Schuyler, whom he had wooed and married during the twilight years of the Revolution. Hamilton certainly loved Elizabeth, whom he affectionately referred to as “Eliza,” but valued much more the connection she fostered to the Schuyler family, one of the more influential, slave-owning families of New York City. Hamilton’s marriage to Eliza serves as another example of Hamilton putting his

³⁹ Syrett, Harold and Jacob E. Cooke, eds. *The Papers of Hamilton*. Vol 2. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961-87).

⁴⁰ Randall, Willard Sterne. *Hamilton: A Life*. (New York: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2003, 261-262).

settled antipathy for slavery beneath his desire to further his own social position in American society. At times, Philip Schuyler, the patron of the family, owned as many as twenty-seven slaves, working on the family estate in Albany and a plantation in Saratoga⁴¹. Records are unclear as to whether or not Hamilton and Eliza owned slaves within their personal household – financial records do not indicate clearly that the Hamilton household held ownership of house slaves, and an 1804 letter written by Angelica Schuyler noted regretfully that Eliza did not have slaves to assist with a large party that the Hamiltons were planning⁴². Regardless, Hamilton accepted this aspect of the Schuyler family’s power in order to facilitate his own social mobility.

In addition to his new law practice and his budding new family, Hamilton involved himself in other pursuits in New York. Hamilton played a direct role in the resurrection of his alma mater, King’s College, becoming a trustee of the revived Columbia College. The minutes of the Trustees of Columbia College reveal that Hamilton regularly attended meetings from 1784 until the time of his death in 1804⁴³. Hamilton set standards for the early administrators of Columbia College, stating that the president of the college must be “a gentleman...as well as a sound scholar...and his politics be of the right sort.” Hamilton prevented Dr. Benjamin Rush, a prominent statesman during the American Revolution, from obtaining an administrative post in the medical division of Columbia College⁴⁴.

Hamilton’s most notable activity regarding his views on slavery was his role in the foundation of the Society for the Promotion of the Manumission of Slaves in New York. Hamilton joined his contemporaries and old friends John Jay and Robert Troup to establish the society in early 1785. The New York Manumission Society, as it was known, conducted a wide-

⁴¹ Chernow, Ron. *Hamilton*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 210

⁴² Syrett, Harold and Jacob E. Cooke, eds. *The Papers of Hamilton*. Vol 19. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961-87).

⁴³ Humphreys, David. *Papers of David C. Humphreys*. Manuscript. From Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Columbia University, Box 1. 1975.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

ranging campaign against slavery, printing essays, producing literature, and establishing a registry to prevent freed blacks from being dragged back into servitude⁴⁵. Early records of the Manumission Society do not reveal heavy involvement from Hamilton – it even appears that he missed the inaugural meeting of the society⁴⁶. Perhaps Hamilton simply lent his prestige to a worthy cause in order to mix again with the upper echelon of New York society, including notable men such as Nicholas Fish, William Livingston, John Rodgers, John Mason, James Duane, and William Duer. However, later records show that Hamilton did indeed play a consequential role in the society, penning a proposal with Robert Troup and White Matlack for the members of the Society to emancipate their slaves within a specified timeframe. The Society members thought Hamilton’s proposal was too radical and scrapped his plan. After leaving the Society for a short period, Hamilton returned as a counselor to the Society and helped to draft a petition to end the New York slave trade⁴⁷. Hamilton’s efforts to further the cause of abolition through the Manumission Society did not conflict with his personal ambitions or his interests in property rights or the construction of the American republic – since the members of the Society were tasked to emancipate their slaves on their own volition, Hamilton felt no need to hinder any effort at potential abolition through this venture.

Hamilton had to cease his activity with the New York Manumission Society, and New York society at large, as the new United States entered the process of constructing a new and unified government. After a failed attempt at the reformation of the Articles of Confederation in Annapolis in 1786, Hamilton worked tirelessly to arrange the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia with the purpose of revising the system of American government. Hamilton served

⁴⁵ Chernow, Ron. *Hamilton*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 214-215.

⁴⁶ New York Manumission Society. "New-York Manumission Society Records." Manuscript. (New-York Historical Society, New York. 1785-1849).

⁴⁷ Chernow, Ron. *Hamilton*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 214-215.

as a central negotiator during the Constitutional Convention, often making compromises to ensure the establishment of a unified form of government for the infant United States. Though compromises regarding citizenship and the structure of government were reached with careful effort from the delegates, the specter of slavery haunted the convention. Southern states refused to budge on the issue whatsoever, and supported the Virginia Plan of congressional representation in order to protect the peculiar institution of slavery. Hamilton realized that a difficult compromise needed to be struck in order to ensure that a unified nation would emerge from the convention, and grudgingly accepted the “federal ratio” of five slaves counting as three whites for the purposes of congressional representation. He glumly concluded that without this federal ratio, “no union could have possibly been formed”⁴⁸. In exchange for the ratio, Hamilton argued for the eventual abolition of the slave trade in the United States, which the Southern states conceded – the importation of slaves into the United States would cease after 1808. Though northerners would be hopeful that the end of the slave trade might signal the eventual end of slavery, Hamilton and his cohorts in the Convention recognized that such an outcome was at most an illusory hope⁴⁹. Despite his misgivings about the Constitution that the Convention had conceived, Hamilton recognized that it was the best hope the United States had at a uniform central government, and set his efforts on the arduous task of ratifying it through the states. Yet again, Hamilton recognized that the potential for an advancement of the United States would be deterred by a frontal assault on the institution of slavery, and chose to prioritize the former.

Hamilton understood that New York’s ratification of the Constitution would be absolutely critical to its overall acceptance, and feverishly penned the *Federalist Papers* in collaboration with John Jay and James Madison to persuade New Yorkers to accept the

⁴⁸ Ellis, Joseph J. *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 201.

⁴⁹ Chernow, Ron. *Hamilton*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 239.

Constitution. Hamilton penned fifty-one essays in total, many of which dealt directly with the issue of property rights. Despite his misgivings about the institution of slavery, Hamilton accepted that slaves counted as property under the Constitution, and suggested in his essays that the more property meant a stronger vote for the citizen⁵⁰. Hamilton harbored distrust for the lower classes and favored a de facto aristocracy in the new American republic to ensure political stability. Hamilton had labored all of his life to enter the upper echelons of society, and consequently weighted heavily the political influence the wealthy, property-owning upper classes would have in the constitutional government. Despite his monumental contributions to the formation of the new republic, Hamilton at his core favored the political system of Great Britain, and accepted a legislature where representation favored wealthy, property owning men. Hamilton's support of the three-fifths clause of the Constitution coincided with his commitment to the ideal of property rights, and serves as another example of Hamilton prioritizing a personal agenda rather than the abolition of slavery.

Hamilton ultimately accepted protecting slavery in the Constitution to solidify the union of the North and the South, which was crucial to the financial growth that Hamilton envisioned. The compromises that Hamilton made to perpetuate slavery within the framework of the Constitution were accepted not because Hamilton wished to perpetuate slavery, but because Hamilton recognized that a unified government would not find fruition without slavery's continued existence. The economic prosperity of the United States depended on harmonious relations between the North and South. Plus, Hamilton maintained that the Southern agrarian economy put the nation at an "advantage," as the Southern crops of tobacco, rice, and indigo had

⁵⁰ Syrett, Harold and Jacob E. Cooke, eds. *The Papers of Hamilton*. Vol 4. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961-87).

to serve as “capital objects in treaties of commerce with foreign nations”⁵¹. Hamilton saw the continued existence of slavery in the United States as a necessary concession for economic growth, and chose national economic power over taking a stand against slavery. A refusal to budge on the issue would have made it impossible to ratify the Constitution.

Though Hamilton had spent the latter part of his life conceding on the issue of slavery in order to further his personal ambitions and the interests of the early American republic, his work as the eventual Treasury Secretary of the United States allowed him to lay the foundations of an American economy independent of slavery. Under Washington, Hamilton had unprecedented power to establish the financial system of the United States. He believed that manufacturing was a more desirable activity than agriculture since it yielded higher profits⁵². In the magnum opus of his economic plan for the United States, the *Report on the Subject of Manufactures*, Hamilton conceded that “agriculture is, not only, the most productive but the only productive species of industry” and emphasized its importance in an economy, but that American economic independence would have to come about from the growth of manufacturing and its establishment as a permanent feature of the economic system of the nation⁵³. Hamilton argued that this could be established through subsidies to manufacturing, regulation of trade through tariffs promoting internal production, and other forms of government support. This increase in manufacturing, Hamilton proposed, would attract young, talented immigrants to the United States and expand applications of technology and science for all sectors of the economy, including agriculture. The *Report* does not make a single mention of slavery, but refers to labor as human capital as a variable input (wage labor) rather than a fixed function of capital (slave labor). Hamilton’s

⁵¹ The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787, 3 vols. - Online Library of Liberty. Vol. 1, 5-6.

⁵² Dorfman, Joseph and Tugwell, Rexford Guy. “Alexander Hamilton: Nation-Maker.” *Columbia University Quarterly* (December 1937), 62

⁵³ Hamilton, Alexander. “Report on Manufactures.” Manuscript. Library of Congress, Washington.

Report on the Subject of Manufactures, coupled with *First and Second Reports on Public Credit* (his reports on public finance and national banking respectively), laid out an economic blueprint for the United States devoid of slavery. Though Hamilton had to compromise on the issue of slavery to secure the unification of the United States necessary for the financial vision he harbored, Hamilton's omission of slavery in his plans for the United States economy in no way interfered with his personal ambitions, his devotion to property rights, or his perception of American interests. A further indication of the free labor nature of Hamilton's *Report of Manufactures* is the adoption of the measure as a cornerstone of the early Republican Party platform, along with the opposition to the perpetuity and expansion of slavery. The *Report* was so radical for its time that one Hamilton chronicler stated that Hamilton had, with his plan, "prophesied much of post-Civil War America"⁵⁴.

Hamilton's economic plan met heavy opposition from his contemporaries Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, both Virginian slave-owners. Hamilton's detractors opposed the subsidies to industry, fearing detrimental effects on American agriculture, which they saw as the backbone of the American economy. Ultimately however, Jefferson and Madison could not concede, as Hamilton could, that the central reason the agrarian economy retained such robustness was the free cost of labor stemming from plantation slavery. The genius of Hamilton's economic plan unfortunately went ignored, and his detractors won out – Congress shelved the *Report on Manufactures*, and Hamilton made no effort to resurrect his plan from legislative oblivion⁵⁵. Hamilton's landmark work, and potentially his largest contribution to the abolition of slavery in the United States, did not find a platform of action until well after Hamilton's death.

⁵⁴ Flexner, James Thomas. *The Young Hamilton: A Biography*. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1978), 437.

⁵⁵ Chernow, Ron. *Hamilton*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 378.

After serving out his term as George Washington's Treasury Secretary, Hamilton returned back to New York and resumed work with the New York Manumission Society in January of 1798. As one of four legal advisers, Hamilton defended free blacks from out-of-state slave masters who brandished bills of sale and attempted to snatch them off the streets of New York⁵⁶. The Manumission Society enjoyed one of its most significant victories in 1799, when the New York Assembly decreed the gradual abolition of slavery in the state of New York by a vote of 68 to 23. The Society continued its work, with Hamilton one of the few at the helm, running a school for black children and protesting the practice of New York slaveholders who were circumventing state laws by exporting slaves to the south, from where they were transferred to the West Indian sugar plantations that Hamilton had known as a boy. Hamilton stayed heavily involved in the Manumission Society until his death, despite his multiplying commitments.⁵⁷ Now that he had established himself in the history of the United States, ensured that property rights played a role in the Constitution of the new Republic, and laid the foundation for the economic system of the United States, Hamilton finally felt free to work with an institution like the Manumission Society that allowed him to rectify the racial injustice that surrounded Hamilton in his early years.

The rise of Alexander Hamilton from impoverished, orphaned squalor to become a key player in the construction of the United States explicates both his personal views and public actions regarding slavery and race. During his childhood and upbringing in St. Croix, Hamilton witnessed firsthand the awful conditions of the slaves, and absorbed philosophical abstractions critical of slavery during his education at King's College. Though from his early life he adopted a comprehensive hatred of the institution of slavery, Hamilton harbored boundless ambitions, for

⁵⁶ Ibid, 581.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 582.

himself and for the philosophical rights he believed in that would eventually become instrumental in his economic plan for the United States. Whenever confronted with the choice of furthering his ambitions or choosing to weaken slavery in the United States, Hamilton chose the former. This trend in Hamilton's life does not detract from the monumental accomplishments of the most famous student of Columbia College, for Hamilton, despite submitting to his personal ambitions, did what he could to cripple slavery until his death in 1804. Hamilton's views on race and the freed slave's place in American society were far more progressive than those of his contemporaries: not only did Hamilton reject methods like colonization and mindsets of racial superiority, but Hamilton also believed that African slaves had mental faculties equal to those of whites, and deserved a fair standing within the American republic. Hamilton believed that slavery was a retrograde institution when posed in juxtaposition with his revolutionary vision of a manufactory America, and his career serves to underscore the limits of anti-slavery sentiment during his time – slavery was not the central dialectical issue of Hamilton's era, and thus the institution did not occupy a central space in Hamilton's mind. Ultimately, a frontal assault on slavery in the time of Hamilton would have endangered the fledgling union of a new nation that Hamilton had devoted his life to constructing. When considering the stakes of his era, Hamilton's prioritization of his personal and public ambitions over the destruction of slavery becomes all the more clear. Alexander Hamilton had resplendent visions for himself and the United States, yet ultimately remained a pragmatist who understood and only participated in the battles that he could win – unfortunately for his time, slavery, so ingrained in the American South, was an impossible battle for Hamilton to win.

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