

ALEXANDER HAMILTON: SLAVERY AND RACE IN A REVOLUTIONARY GENERATION

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ALEXANDER HAMILTON WAS BORN in the West Indies in 1757 amid lush sugar plantations on the island of Nevis—a place where black slaves outnumbered white residents twelve to one. Hamilton was not from a wealthy plantation-owning family, however. His mother, Rachel Fawcett Lavien, had married and subsequently divorced, but because the courts refused to make divorce legal, Alexander and his older brother James, products of her second union, were legally born out of wedlock. Then James Hamilton Sr. abandoned the family, leaving them to live on the margins of that beautiful island's society, which was made rich by the labor of slaves.

During the 1760s, Rachel, with her sons, moved to the much larger island of St. Croix, where she received some assistance from her older sister and opened a small store in the main town of Christiansted. Although its population was more than twice the size of that on Nevis, the racial composition on St. Croix was comparable. Of the twenty-four thousand residents on the island, twenty-two thousand were black slaves. Again Alexander and James were growing up in a slave society and observing its daily practice, an experience that would shape Alexander's attitudes about race and slavery for the rest of his life.

While planters lived in luxury, Alexander and James lived more like plantation laborers. Both boys worked to help support the family. Then in 1768, Rachel died, leaving her young sons virtually orphaned. Although never affluent, she had acquired some property, for among her possessions, listed with the pots and pans, six chairs and two

tables, were two slave boys, Christian and Ajax. In her will, Rachel left these human possessions to her own young sons—Christian to James and Ajax to Alexander, although the Hamilton boys never took possession of these slaves. The court held that since they were the illegitimate offspring of a fallen woman, they had no right of inheritance. Thus, Alexander Hamilton did not become a slaveholder at an early age, but was well familiar with slavery and its effect on slaves and on slaveholders. As an outcast himself, he may have in some ways identified with the slave's depressed and despised position in West Indian society.¹

In many ways Alexander was an exceptional young man. He had a talent for writing, spoke French fluently, and possessed a surprising understanding of mathematics and calculation. During his late teenage years, he worked for the Beekman and Cruger Company, a trading firm on St. Croix. The business dealt in sugar and African slaves. During the early 1770s, local newspapers carried announcements announcing as many as three hundred slaves to be auctioned in the company's yard.²

As company clerk, Hamilton was responsible for much of the business's paper work and accounting, and at one point, at the age of only seventeen, he supervised the company's affairs while Nicholas Cruger traveled to New York. Even so, Hamilton rarely worked directly with the slave transfer end of the trade. He did, however, hear the stories told by the sailors from the slave-trading crews and he saw the poor Africans coming ashore after weeks at sea during the Middle Passage. He recorded the arrival of 250 slaves from the Gold Coast of West Africa. They were, he reported, "very indifferent indeed, sickly and thin . . .," and then he commented on the bottom line, "they average about 30 [pounds sterling]." He was alarmed at the condition of these human beings, but he remained a part of the business, participating, at least indirectly, in buying and selling human beings. A letter written in his hand ordered the acquisition of "two or three poor boys" but asked that they be "bound in the most reasonable manner you can." Despite this gesture, Hamilton clearly intended that these slaves generate profit. "I want them to be put on plantations," he explained. Surely, he understood what plantation labor would mean for these "poor boys."³

Hamilton was caught in a system of slavery that he increasingly disliked, but at this early age he had neither the power nor the will to move against it. He never commented directly on the impact of West Indian slavery on his thinking as a young man, but clearly, as he approached adulthood, he grew to hate the institution for what it did to the slave and to the slave master. Perhaps his experiences with

slavery in the West Indies led him to dislike the place, so that in 1772, when he had the opportunity to leave the Caribbean, he took it and never returned. Assisted by his aunt, his employer, and minister Hugh Knox, Hamilton went off to New Jersey where he started school in Elizabethtown, and then entered King's College (now Columbia University) in New York City.

His experiences in the islands had soured him on slaveholder society, but New York City was a place of slavery as well. The institution had been a major part of New York's economy and social structure since the Dutch West India Company brought the first African slaves to what was then New Netherlands in 1626. By the time the English seized the colony in 1664 it was well established with slaves accounting for more than one-fifth of the colony's population. During the eighteenth century, New York's slave population continued to rise to more than three thousand slaves in the city and more than fifteen thousand colony-wide by the time Hamilton arrived. Next to Charleston, South Carolina, New York City was the largest slaveholding city in British North America.⁴

Yet, because Hamilton was accustomed to living amid a vast sea of slaves (as many as nine of every ten people), New York society, with its 15–20 percent black population, must have seemed nearly white. Even on the great estates of the Hudson River Valley, slaveholdings were small by island standards. Slavery was also less secure in New York than it had been in the West Indies. In 1771, New York Quakers vowed not to sell slaves except for estate liquidation, and in 1776 the Quaker meeting refused to accept financial contributions or other services from slaveholders.⁵

During his first few years in New York, Hamilton became aware of the gathering storm of American discontent with British rule. He also heard the rhetoric of freedom that served the patriot cause. As white Americans worried aloud about American loss of liberty to the British Crown, the condition of black Americans in slavery became the point of comparison. "Those who are taxed without their own consent, expressed by themselves or their representatives, are slaves," declared John Dickinson of Pennsylvania. "We are therefore—SLAVES," he concluded. Ironically Dickinson was the largest slaveholder in Philadelphia at the time.⁶ Time and again, it was repeated, Americans saw themselves as engaged in a struggle against slavery, a bondage imposed on them by the Crown. "I speak it with shame—I speak it with indignation—WE ARE SLAVES," cried Boston's Josiah Quincy.⁷ That slaveholders should make this announcement is significant indeed, for as historian Edmund Morgan has reminded us, American freedom came to be defined in terms of its opposite, American

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slavery. Thus, at a time when the vast majority of African Americans in British North America were held in slavery, American identity itself was coming to carry a distinct racial characteristic.

Hamilton was one of those determined to resist the loss of freedom. He agreed that slavery was no fit condition for human beings. In 1774 he wrote that “All men have one common original: they participate in one common nature, and consequently have one common right.” There was, he argued, 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 warned that “absolute sovereignty of parliament . . . [means] absolute slavery [for Americans].”⁸ For this young man, steeped in the ways and consequences of slavery, the thought of free white people reduced to slaves carried special meaning, in light of his West Indian memories. Most North American slaveholders blinded themselves to the hypocrisy of their assertion that all men had a right to be free. Some Americans, however, Hamilton among them, saw the contradiction clearly. As the Virginia slaveholder Thomas Jefferson declared the “self-evident” truths of human equality, Hamilton warned about the dangers not only of being reduced to the level of slaves, but also of enslaving others. He cautioned that “the pages of history are replete with instances that loudly warn us to beware of slavery.” Its horrors, as he saw them, were sickening and blatant, “too obvious to stand in need of [enumeration].” Like Jefferson, who would become his political rival, Hamilton worried over the corrupting influence of slavery on slaveholders and the white population more generally. Slavery, as he saw it, “relaxes the sinews of industry, clips the wings of commerce, and introduces misery and indigence in every shape.” Holding slaves, he argued, appealed to the worst in human character: the “avarice and lust of his [the slave’s] superiors.”⁹ As the Revolution got under way, he became more vocal in his opposition to slavery, and his racial views, while not entirely egalitarian, nevertheless were relatively progressive for his day. Like slaves themselves, Hamilton came to advocate a general freedom.

Meanwhile, slaves demanded that they be included in the liberty for which America was fighting. In 1773, Massachusetts slaves petitioned the government, using language calculated for effect in these revolutionary times. “We expect great things from men who have made such a noble stand against the designs of their *fellow-men* to enslave them,” they announced. Then they asked the Massachusetts patriots “give us that ample relief which, *as men*, we have a natural right to.”¹⁰ They understood that long before the Revolution began, African Americans were directly involved in America’s freedom

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1785.
 Dec. 25.

Committee
 to draft
 Rules.

The Intention of the Meeting being explained by Mr Froup, and a Chairman proposed; Melancton Smith was appointed

On Motion Resolved that Samuel Finley, Lawrence Embree, Robert Froup, Melancton Smith and John Murray Senior be a Committee to draw up a set of Rules for the Government of the said Society, and that they make Report thereof at the next Meeting.

The Meeting was then adjourned to the 1st day of February next, at 6 o'clock in the Evening at the Coffee House.

2nd Dec. 1st

1st February, at 6 o'clock P.M. the following Persons Assembled at the Coffee House agreeable to the Adjournment of the former Meeting, to wit.

John Jay	White Kallack
Alexander M. Douglass	Jacob Seaman
Alexander Hamilton	Rev John Gano
Robert Froup	William Keefe
John Lawrence	Ezekiel Robins
Peter Yates	Effingham Condit
Melancton Smith	Lebulon Barton
John Lawrence Junr	Elijah Cocks
John Murray Senr	William Tarkenton
William Goforth	Edward Lawrence
Benjamin B. Burdick	Joseph Lawrence
Lawrence Embree	James Cozwell
Willat Seaman	Matthew Victor

Persons who
 joined the 2^d
 Meeting.

New-York Society for Promoting the Manumission of Slaves, and Protecting Such of Them as Have Been, or May Be Liberated. Page from meeting minute book, 1785. New-York Manumission Society records.

struggle—from the Stamp Act mobs to the Boston Massacre. They were also part of the earliest fighting in the war, as minutemen at Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill. Nevertheless, fearful of the reaction of South Carolina and Georgia, America's two most important slave states, George Washington refused to recruit black troops for the Continental Army.¹¹

Then, in 1775, Lord Dunmore, the royal governor of Virginia, offered freedom to slaves or indentured servants who could get to British lines; tens of thousands fled American plantations. Many served in the British army. Finally, George Washington agreed to recruit black soldiers. Hamilton had urged this course of action all along. "With proper management," he wrote to John Jay, "I have not the least doubt that the [N]egroes will make very excellent soldiers." In his comments, Hamilton steered a narrow course, conceding the possibility that there might be some validity in the argument that blacks might not be assertive enough to make good fighters. "It is a maxim with some great military judges," he wrote, "that with sensible officers, soldiers can hardly be too stupid. . . ." Then he added an attention-grabbing assessment of African-American abilities. At a time when Jefferson questioned the mental and moral abilities of blacks, and speculated in writing about their inferiority, Hamilton wrote, "For their natural faculties are as good as ours."¹²

ULTIMATELY, five thousand African Americans served the American cause and many more took advantage of the British offer. By the end of the Revolution, thousands of slaves gained freedom; some left for Europe or Canada with the withdrawing British troops, some were freed as a result of service with Continental forces. In the northern states of the new nation, abolitionist sentiment increased as the contradiction of a revolution for freedom fought by a society tolerating slavery became strong enough to challenge the power of slaveholders in that region. With American freedom in sight, more and more non-slaveholders indicted the American hypocrisy. "It always seemed a most iniquitous scheme to me," wrote Abigail Adams in a letter to her husband John, "to fight ourselves for what we are daily robbing and plundering from those who have as good a right to freedom as we have."¹³

Hamilton agreed. He was among more than thirty New Yorkers who, in January 1785, formed the New-York Society for Promoting the Manumission of Slaves, and Protecting Such of Them as Have Been, or May be Liberated. With John Jay as its president and Hamilton as

its secretary, this organization sought to end slavery in the state, the first such non-Quaker emancipation society in New York history. Paradoxically, many society members were themselves slaveholders. They rejected a resolution that Hamilton supported, requiring that members free their slaves. Still, over the next decade the society worked to make slavery illegal in New York and to protect free blacks from being illegally taken into slavery. Finally, in 1799 the state passed its first emancipation law. It was a gradual emancipation provision that phased out bondage over decades. Not until 1827, on the 4th of July, was slavery finally ended in New York.¹⁴

Although Hamilton did not live to see it, slavery's demise in New York was to some extent his doing, having been motivated in part by the environment of his youth. He was one of those who refused to ignore the illogic, the irreligious, the hypocritical racial distinction that many of his friends and associates in Revolutionary America were willing to make. He publicly condemned Americans who demanded freedom for themselves as a God-given right, while depriving others of freedom and profiting from that deprivation. While Thomas Jefferson spoke eloquently about the virtues of ending slavery, he failed to use his opportunities and his considerable influence to urge his state or the nation toward universal freedom. Conversely, Hamilton's actions most often matched his most progressive ideals. Jefferson, with his speculations on African-American natural inferiority, never envisioned a multiracial America. The removal of black people to some western territory, to the West Indies, or to some part of Africa was, in his view, essential for emancipation.

HAMILTON, ON THE OTHER HAND, pressed for emancipation in New York without any such provision. By the time its emancipation law went into effect, New York State's black population had grown to almost forty thousand, while the number of African Americans in New York City had grown to over six thousand, half of whom were free. In 1790, there were places in the Hudson River Valley and in the rural areas outside of the city where blacks constituted a larger proportion of the population than they did in the slave states of Maryland, Delaware, or Missouri on the eve of the Civil War, sixty years later.¹⁵ Yet Hamilton did not call for removal of blacks emerging from slavery. He is traditionally credited with envisioning an industrialized, urbanized America, but we might consider that he may have also envisioned a multiracial America. Of all the differences between Hamilton and Jefferson, perhaps their

assumptions about the racial future of America were most telling. For a man who had grown up in a black society in the West Indies, a multi-racial New York or a multiracial America was not unimaginable.

Nor was it inconceivable to Hamilton that black people might be good international economic partners and reliable political allies. When a slave revolt in the spring of 1792 became a revolution that brought the independent nation of Haiti into existence in 1804, he and other Federalists lent support. While Jeffersonian Republicans might endorse the right of a people's revolution in theory, they recoiled from such when the people were black slaves rising for freedom, just a few hundred miles from America's slave South. During Haiti's struggle for independence from France, Hamilton supported its revolutionary leader Toussaint Louverture, and also worked with his long-time close friend, Edward Stevens, Haiti's consul general during the Adams administration. In 1799 Hamilton suggested a plan of government that ultimately helped to shape Haiti's national constitution. While Jefferson refused to recognize the legitimacy of the first independent black nation in the Western Hemisphere, Hamilton pressed for close economic ties with this newest American state.¹⁶

Jefferson had traveled to and lived in France, and was greatly influenced by his experiences there, but his vision for America was based on a narrow racial assumption shaped largely in Virginia. Hamilton, who had not traveled as extensively in Europe, was more farsighted in his views of America's racial future. As we look back from the twenty-first century, the life and politics of Alexander Hamilton help us to appreciate the variety of views on slavery and race among the nation's founders in the Revolutionary generation.

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NOTES

1. See, for example, Robert A. Hendrickson, *The Rise and Fall of Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1981), 42.
2. Marie B. Hecht, *Odd Destiny: The Life of Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, Inc., 1982), 8.
3. Hendrickson, *Rise and Fall*, 29.
4. Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626–1863* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 47; Edgar J. McManus, *Black Bondage in The North* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1973), 210.
5. Leo H. Hirsch, Jr., “The Slave in New York,” *Journal of Negro History* 16, no. 4 (October 1931): 383–414.
6. John Dickinson, *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies* (Philadelphia, 1768), 38, quoted in F. Nwabueze Okoye, “Chattel Slavery as the Nightmare of the American Revolutionaries,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (January 1980): 3–28.
7. Josiah Quincy, Jr., *Observations on the Act of Parliament Commonly Called the Boston Port-Bill; With Thoughts on Civil Society and Standing Armies* (Boston, 1774), 69, quoted in Okoye, “Chattel Slavery,” 5.
8. Alexander Hamilton, *A Full Vindication of the Measures of the Congress* (New York, 1774) in Alexander Hamilton, *Writings*, ed. Joanne B. Freeman, (New York: Library of America, 2001), 10–43.
9. Hendrickson, *Rise and Fall*, 42.
10. Peter Bestes and others, circular letter “in behalf of our fellow slaves in this Province and by order of their committee,” Boston, 20 April 1773, New-York Historical Society, also in Sidney Kaplan, *The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution* (Washington, DC: National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 1973), 12.
11. See James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
12. Alexander Hamilton to John Jay, 14 March 1779, in Hamilton, *Writings*, 56–58. John Jay would later become the first chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.
13. Abigail Adams to John Adams, 22 September 1774, in *Adams Family Correspondence*, ed. Lyman H. Butterfield (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), I: 13–14, 162.
14. Richard Brookhiser, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 176. The “girl” in the Hamilton household that some historians have taken for a slave was probably an indentured servant.
15. Roger G. Kennedy, *Burr, Hamilton, and Jefferson: A Study in Character* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 91.
16. Roger G. Kennedy, *Orders from France: The Americans and the French in a Revolutionary World, 1780–1820*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989).