

THE EDUCATION OF ALEXANDER HAMILTON

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THE KING'S COLLEGE (later Columbia) that the eighteen-year-old Alexander Hamilton entered in the fall of 1773 was his backup. It was clearly not the first choice of his sponsors, the Reverend Hugh Knox, back on Hamilton's native St. Croix, or those who took up his cause upon his arrival in New Jersey in September 1772, William Livingston and Elias Boudinot. All three were Presbyterians with links to the College of New Jersey (later Princeton), while Livingston, twenty years earlier as a lawyer in New York City and a member of the New York Assembly, had raised a "hideous clamour" in an unsuccessful attempt to keep the Anglican-infused King's College from ever opening.¹ It was only the refusal of Princeton's President John Witherspoon to admit Hamilton with advanced standing that sent him across the Hudson River to New York City and King's College. His acceptance there as a "special student" suggests that President Myles Cooper, an ecclesiastical placeman of the equivocating sort, was more open to negotiating his status. When Hamilton formally matriculated at King's College in 1774, it was likely as a member of the Class of 1776.²

King's College opened in July 1754 and secured its royal charter from King George II three months later. It was the fifth of nine colleges chartered in the British colonies. Its impetus had been the announcement in the summer of 1745 that New Jersey—which only seven years earlier had secured a government separate from New York and was still viewed by New Yorkers to be in their cultural catch basin—was to have its own college. By the time the College of New

Jersey opened a year later, just across the Hudson River from Manhattan in Newark (it moved to Princeton in 1753), the New York Assembly had called for a college of its own and over the next several years authorized three separate lotteries to help finance it.³

In 1752, the vestrymen of New York City's Trinity Church offered the College Lottery Commission six acres of land upon which to build the college, thereby ending all discussion of possible sites outside the city. One year later, William Livingston wrote a series of articles in his own *Independent Reflector*, pressing the novel idea that the proposed college should have no religious affiliation. The Trinity vestrymen responded by conditioning their earlier grant of land by requiring that the head of the college be an Anglican, and that all religious services be in keeping with the Anglican liturgy. Both acting governor James de Lancey, a pew holder at Trinity and longtime political opponent of the Livingstons, and the Governor's Council, a majority of whom were also members of Trinity, accepted these conditions and saw them written into the new college's 1754 charter.⁴

The political wrangling that preceded its opening aside, King's College began with auspicious support. In addition to the grant of land and the proceeds from the provincial lotteries (only half of which eventually made it into the college coffers), the college had a successful fundraising drive both in New York and in Britain, where George III made a personal donation of five hundred pounds. But it was the bequests of Trinity Church members Paul Richard and Joseph Murray that made King's College the richest of the colonial colleges. Murray's bequest of eight thousand pounds was the largest personal benefaction made in colonial America.⁵

Because King's College was rich it could afford to stay small. That it was the most expensive of the colonial colleges was not a matter of needing tuition revenues to cover expenses, but a decided preference of its governors. As one of its graduates and professor-elect John Vardill said in 1772, contra Princeton's policy of high enrollments and low tuition, King's College provided "the Education of all who can afford the Education."⁶ Following the College's 1764 commencement, at which only two students received degrees, Myles Cooper complacently informed the local press: "It would be injurious to the Reputation of the College, not to observe that ample Amends were made for the number of candidates, by the Display of their proficiency and the Elegance of their Performances."⁷ During its twenty-two years of operation, only 226 students attended King's College, and only half of them stayed to graduate. President Cooper's cryptic explanations in his matriculation book for two dropouts suggest the

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College made little effort to retain those who wished to leave: “After three years went to nothing”; “Left in his third year and was not much regretted.”⁸

In addition to there being fewer students at King’s College than at the other colonial colleges, despite its New York City location, the students it attracted were younger than those elsewhere. Thus, Alexander Hamilton’s matriculation in 1773 at age eighteen, according to records back on St. Croix, or even at sixteen as he later calculated his age, made him one of the college’s oldest students. The mean age of the nine students who entered with him in 1773 was fourteen. For example, his roommate in 1773-74, Robert Troup, entered King’s College in 1770 at age thirteen, and although a junior in 1773, was likely two years younger than Hamilton; Gouverneur Morris, of the Class of 1768, entered at age twelve. Thus, it was not only his troubled family circumstances, his prior experience in business, and his travels that made Hamilton unique; it was also his age.⁹

While Hamilton’s West Indian origins also set him apart from most of his classmates, nearly all of whom had grown up within walking distance of the college, King’s College had attracted a handful of students from various British settlements throughout the Caribbean. Among its Board of Governors at one time or another were four members of the Cruger family, which owned the mercantile establishment in St. Croix where Hamilton had apprenticed as a shipping agent. Entering with him was, by the college’s parochial standards, another “exotic,” John Parke Custis, the stepson of Virginia planter George Washington, who arrived with his slave-servant “Joe” and lasted three months before exhausting his year’s allowance and plotting an elopement back in Virginia.¹⁰

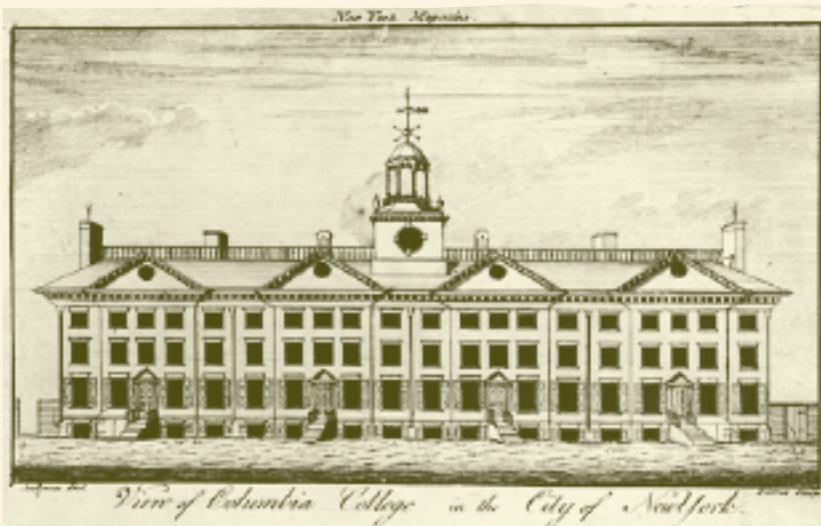
ALTHOUGH HAMILTON was raised a Presbyterian, 90 percent of his college mates were either Anglicans, Dutch Reformed, or Dutch-Reformed-on-their-way-to-becoming-Anglican. Presbyterians constituted the largest denominational group in New York City, but made up only 2 percent of the King’s College student body, and were totally absent among the fifty-nine governors. But the Anglicans of the day, much as their Episcopalian successors, were little given to proselytizing, so Hamilton’s religious views, whatever they were, went officially unchallenged during his undergraduate years. His later conversion to Episcopalianism was more likely a matter of unforced personal choice abetted by social considerations.¹¹

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What of the academic program Hamilton encountered during his five semesters at King's College? His "special student" status in 1773–74 and the not-always-dependable memory of his roommate, Robert Troup, suggest that Hamilton "originally destined himself to the science of Physic."¹² That is, he took medical courses with Dr. Samuel Clossy and likely some of the other five physicians who made up the College's medical faculty, which was constituted as a medical school within the College in 1767, just months after the College of Philadelphia (later the University of Pennsylvania) had organized its medical school. If this was the case, Hamilton had chosen wisely because by the time he matriculated, the College's non-medical faculty consisted of only President Myles Cooper, who taught belles-lettres to upperclassmen; a Latin tutor, likely Benjamin Moore; and the Irishman Robert Harpur, a much-maligned tutor (not least for his Presbyterianism and his anti-English leanings) who taught mathematics and all the sciences that Clossy did not cover. (If Hamilton's study of gunnery on the eve of the Revolution took place as part of his college studies, it was probably with Harpur.) He likely also took Greek and Latin, which were required of regular students for three of their four years, although the absence of Greek flourishes in his later correspondence suggests that, unlike John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, Hamilton never became much of a Hellenist.¹³

Hamilton's considerable skills as polemical writer are probably not attributable to King's College, where literary studies were the responsibility of President Cooper, whose own writing was rather insipid. Here, history must credit Hamilton's prior schooling or simply his natural talent. Both his famous—if overwrought—report

Cornelius Tiebout after
J. Anderson. *View of
Columbia College in
the City of New York.*
Copper engraving,
from the *New-York
Magazine*, May 1790.
(PR 020)



of a hurricane hitting St. Croix and his pamphleteering in college, to say nothing of his contributions to the *Federalist Papers* and his *Reports* as treasury secretary, exude a literary confidence quite beyond the powers of any college to inculcate.¹⁴

And what of the College's prevailing politics? Its very name and the possessive punctuation contained therein—King's College—provides a reliable clue: overwhelmingly Loyalist. Of the College's 35 governors alive in 1775, 26 (74 percent) openly opposed the Revolution, while only 3 (9 percent) supported it; of the 12 one-time faculty members alive in 1775, 10 (83 percent) sided with the Crown, 2 (17 percent) with the Revolution. Even among alumni and students, the tilt toward Loyalism was pronounced: of 160 students and alumni whose revolutionary politics have been identified, 117 (73 percent) opposed the Revolution, while 34 (21 percent), among them Hamilton, his roommate Robert Troup and less than a dozen of his 53 contemporaries in the classes of 1772–1775, supported it.¹⁵

How very different in this respect was King's College from all the other colonial colleges. At Princeton, for example, the trustees, faculty and students nearly all reflected the politics of President Witherspoon, whom John Adams praised in 1774 for being “as high a son of liberty as any man in America.”¹⁶ But even at Philadelphia and Harvard, where Loyalists were more in evidence, they were easily outnumbered by their campus patriots. As for Yale, one of its few Tory alumni lamented that his college had become nothing more than “a nursery of sedition, of faction, and republicanism.”¹⁷

To be sure, a handful of King's College alumni sided with the Revolution and went on to figure prominently in the forming of the new republic. These included John Jay (κC 1764), Robert R. Livingston (κC 1765) and Gouverneur Morris (κC 1766), all of whom came from families of provincial New York's Anglican elite that stood the most to lose by a successful revolution from below. No one understood this more clearly than Morris, whose mother, three sisters and their husbands all remained loyal to the crown, when he acknowledged the risk of aligning with a movement wherein “a herd of mechanics are preferred before the first families in the colony.”¹⁸

Indeed, when compared with those of Morris, Jay, and Livingston, Hamilton's decision to join with the Revolutionary cause was relatively risk free. He possessed neither family nor wealth nor dependable social connections to ease his way. John Adams's later characterization of him as “the bastard brat of a Scotch peddler,” if unkind, was genealogically precise. Any plans he might have had in 1775 of taking up the law — as the connected Jay, Morris, and

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Livingston all had after graduation—would have been difficult to implement under his circumstances and the prevailing local arrangements. Even with a college degree, entrance to the New York bar in the early 1770s involved an extended and costly apprenticeship with an attorney whose limited clerkships were not otherwise committed to the sons of relatives or wealthy clients.¹⁹

It is therefore arguable that it was his two-and-one-half years at King's College, its elitist ideology to the contrary, that convinced Alexander Hamilton that he had little to gain by siding with the "first families of the colony" and little to lose in siding with the Revolution, where his polemical skills and military interests might secure him a prominent place under a new, republican dispensation. At least that is how someone just up from the islands with a keen eye on the main chance might have sized up his life's prospects. Ex-President Cooper seems to have had Hamilton in mind in his poem describing his departure from New York in May 1775, attributing his narrow escape from the clutches of a revolutionary mob to the timely intervention of "that divine boy."²⁰ But the twenty-year-old collegian even more aptly fits the tag offered by a later and better English poet, A.E. Housman: "Smart lad."²¹

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NOTES

1. On Livingston's efforts, see Milton M. Klein, ed., *Independent Reflector; or, Weekly Essays on Sundry Important Subjects More particularly Adapted to the Province of New York* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 32–39, 171–214.
2. For Hamilton's early chronology, see Alexander Hamilton, *Writings*, ed. Joanne B. Freeman, (New York: Library of America, 2001), 1035–36.
3. On the pre-founding of King's College, see David C. Humphrey, *From King's College to Columbia, 1746–1800* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), chaps. 1–3; also, Robert A. McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia: A History of Columbia University in the City of New York, 1754–2004* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 7–21.
4. Humphrey, *From King's College*, 52–53.
5. McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia*, 37–40.
6. [John Vardill] *Candid Remarks on Dr. Witherspoon's Address to the Inhabitants of Jamaica and the Other West-India Islands, &c* (Philadelphia: [William Goddard], 1772), 347.
7. *New York Mercury*, May 28, 1764, in Milton Halsey Thomas, "Kings College Commencements in the Newspapers," *Columbia University Quarterly* 22 (June 1930): 232.
8. On King's College dropouts, see "Matriculation Book," in Herbert and Carol Schneider, eds., *Samuel Johnson, President of King's College: His Career and Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1929), 4:243–61. The College provided no financial assistance to needy students, although funds had been given to the College for that purpose. See McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia*, 37.
9. McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia*, 36.
10. *Ibid.*, 46, 35.
11. Douglas Adair, "Was Alexander Hamilton a Christian Statesman?" *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, 12 (April 1955): 308–29; Jean Paul Jordan, "The Anglican Establishment in Colonial New York, 1663–1783" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1971).
12. Nathan Schachner, "Notes and Documents: Alexander Hamilton Viewed by His Friends: The Narratives of Robert Troup and Hercules Mulligan," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, 4 (April 1947): 203–25.
13. McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia*, 29–30, 42–44.
14. For examples of the young Hamilton's prose style, see his early letters as collected in Hamilton, *Writings*, 3–46; for Cooper's, see his self-composed epitaph, quoted in McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia*, 28.
15. See electronic appendix to *Stand, Columbia*, tables A 1.5, B 1.6, B 2.5, http://beatl.barnard.columbia.edu/stand_columbia.
16. John Adams on Witherspoon as quoted in Richard A. Harrison, *Princetonians, 1769–1775: A Biographical Dictionary* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), xxx–xxxii.
17. Quoted in Thomas Jones, *History of New York During the Revolutionary War, and the Leading Events in the Other Colonies at That Period* (1879; repr., ed. Milton Klein, New York: New York Times, 1968) I: 3.
18. On Morris, see Mary-Jo Kline, "Gouverneur Morris and the New Nation, 1775–1788" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1970); on Jay, see Richard B. Morris, *John Jay: The Making of a Revolutionary* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975); on Livingston, see George Dangerfield, *Chancellor Robert R. Livingston of New York, 1746–1813* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1960).
19. On entry into the New York bar, see Paul M. Hamlin, *Legal Education in Colonial New York* (New York: New York University Press, 1939).
20. Myles Cooper, poem in *Gentleman's Magazine* 46 (London, 1776).
21. A.E. Housman, "To an Athlete Dying Young," line 9.