



## Hamilton, Alexander (1757-1804)

by Linda Rapp

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A portrait of Alexander Hamilton created by John Trumbull in 1792.

A hero of the American Revolutionary War and a prominent statesman in the government of the newly formed United States, Alexander Hamilton was held in high public esteem for his knowledge of military operations, economics, and politics, and for his fervent patriotism. In his private life he had affectionate relationships with both men and women, but perhaps his most intense romantic bond was with a young man, John Laurens, who was killed in 1782.

### Early Life

Hamilton was born January 11, 1757 on Nevis, a British colony in the Leeward Islands. His father was a prosperous merchant but lost his fortune. When Hamilton was six, his father abandoned the family, and his mother found refuge for her two sons and herself with relatives on St. Croix. Following his mother's death in 1768, Hamilton, at age twelve, went to work for a local merchant. His obvious intelligence so impressed his employer and his relatives that they arranged to send him to the mainland to pursue his education.

Hamilton arrived in New York in 1772, spent a year at grammar school, and then enrolled at King's College (now Columbia University). He interrupted his studies, however, to join the colonial army, receiving his commission as an officer in March 1776.

Two years earlier Hamilton had written anonymous political pamphlets so sophisticated that they were at first attributed to John Jay, who was more than a decade his senior. Because of Hamilton's intelligence and evident abilities, General George Washington chose him as his secretary and aide-de-camp in 1777, promoting him to lieutenant colonel. Through his initiative and ambition, Hamilton soon became a valued adviser to the general.

### Relationship with John Laurens

While in Washington's service Hamilton befriended a group of other young officers, with one of whom, John Laurens of South Carolina, he had a particularly close relationship. When the two were apart on separate assignments, they exchanged affectionate letters. In September 1779, gently chiding Laurens for not corresponding as often as he would have liked, Hamilton wrote, "like a jealous lover, when I thought you slighted my caresses, my affection was alarmed and my vanity piqued."

Despite the prestige of his appointment on Washington's staff, Hamilton wished to serve in combat like--and perhaps with--his friend Laurens. Using the pretext of a minor disagreement with the general, Hamilton requested and received a transfer in February 1781. The incident left no hard feelings on either side.

Hamilton and Laurens participated in several military campaigns together later that year but were again separated on August 15, 1782, when Hamilton wrote to his friend, addressing him as "My Dear Laurens." Looking beyond the successful conclusion of the war, Hamilton suggested that both of them should be members of the congress of the new country. "We have fought side by side to make America free, let us

hand in hand struggle to make her happy," he wrote in a letter ending, "Yours forever."

It is doubtful that Laurens ever read this letter, for he was killed in a skirmish on August 27. Upon hearing of his friend's death from Major General Nathanael Greene, Hamilton wrote back that he felt "the deepest affliction at the news," adding, "I feel the loss of a friend I truly and most tenderly loved."

In an earlier letter to Laurens (April 1779), Hamilton had proclaimed his affection: "I wish, my dear Laurens, it might be in my power, by actions rather than words, to convince you that I love you." He went on playfully to admonish Laurens because "You should not have taken advantage of my sensibility to steal into my affections without my consent," but assured him that "you will always continue to merit the partiality which you have so artfully instilled into me."

In the same letter Hamilton "empower[ed] and command[ed]" Laurens to find him a wife in South Carolina. He provided an amusing description of the appearance and personality of the ideal candidate, then added "as to fortune, the larger stock of that the better." Hamilton then withdrew the "command," writing, "Do I want a wife? No--I have plagues enough without desiring to add to the number that greatest of all."

He did, however, marry late the following year. His wife, Elizabeth Schuyler, did indeed possess a large stock of fortune: she was the daughter of one of the wealthiest men in New York. Alliance with the prominent family undoubtedly increased Hamilton's prestige, but the match seems to have been based on genuine fondness as well. Hamilton clearly delighted in his eight children, often referring to himself in letters as a paterfamilias.

### **Hamilton's Further Career**

When the Revolutionary War ended, Hamilton spent several months in the intense study of law, after which he was admitted to the bar in the state of New York. His intention at the time--contrary to his recommendation to Laurens--was to devote only a short time to public service before turning to law as a career.

Hamilton did retire from Congress in 1783 to start a law practice in New York City, but his political career was far from over. He participated in the Constitutional Convention of 1787, and when Washington became president in 1789 he chose Hamilton as his Secretary of the Treasury.

Because of Washington's esteem for him, Hamilton was able to wield wider power than the secretaryship of a single department conferred, which sometimes led to clashes with other members of Washington's administration.

Hamilton faced a crisis in 1792 when several of his political adversaries, including James Monroe, accused him of financial improprieties in office. They based their allegations on the story of a small-time con man, James Reynolds, to whom Hamilton had given money. To defend himself against the accusations, Hamilton was forced to admit to having been inveigled into an affair with the man's wife, Maria Reynolds. The couple's objective--in which they succeeded--had been blackmail, and Reynolds concocted the second story only to deflect blame from himself.

Hamilton quit the poorly remunerated Treasury post in January 1795 to resume the practice of law, but he remained a trusted adviser to Washington and a leader of the Federalist Party.

When the highly contentious presidential race of 1800 ended in a tie in the Electoral College and was thrown into the House of Representatives, Hamilton put the good of the country above party loyalty. Believing that the Federalist candidate, Aaron Burr, would be a potentially disastrous president, Hamilton urged his fellow party-members to vote for his longtime political adversary Thomas Jefferson.

Burr never forgave Hamilton for his defeat, and in 1804 challenged him to a duel. When the two met on July 11, Hamilton received a serious wound from which he died the following day.

### **Interpreting the Hamilton-Laurens Relationship**

The terms and categories of homosexual, heterosexual, and bisexual had not been invented in Hamilton's day, and one runs the risk of anachronism in attempting to apply them without qualification to him and his contemporaries. The relationship of Hamilton and Laurens was certainly homosocial, and it clearly involved deep emotional bonds. Whether it also included an overtly sexual dimension is difficult to establish, but that may not be the most important question, since same-sex sexuality is no more limited to genital relations than is heterosexual marriage.

Given Hamilton's later experience as married man and father of a large family, he likely did not identify as a "sodomite" or "bugger" or other term used to designate people whom we would today describe as homosexual. Still, it may well be that his relationship with Laurens was the most important romantic and emotional bond of his life.

It is interesting to note how mid- to late-twentieth-century biographers have dealt with the relationship between Hamilton and Laurens.

Writing in 1946, Nathan Schachner attributed Hamilton's sadness over Laurens's death to the loss of someone who "had been as close to him as a brother" and cited their shared military experience as the basis of their bond.

In a 1957 biography Broadus Mitchell likewise called Hamilton's feeling for Laurens "brotherly affection." In Mitchell's 1970 work, Laurens became Hamilton's "fast friend." "Their companionship in the army" was again adduced as the reason for their closeness. Of Hamilton's "deepest affliction" over Laurens's death, Mitchell explains it away by noting, "Others--Greene, Washington, John Adams, even the Charleston *Royal Gazette*--were similarly sorrowful."

By the time Stuart Gerry Brown wrote his biography in 1967, he was obviously somewhat embarrassed and felt the need to conceal some aspects of his subject's relationship with Laurens. He described Laurens as Hamilton's "intimate friend" and recipient of the letter about his requisites in a wife. Brown, however, reproduced *only* the portion of the letter dealing with the ideal spouse, omitting among other things Hamilton's initial declaration of love for Laurens, his rejection of the idea of marriage, and the suggestive final line of the long letter: "I have gratified my feelings, by lengthening out the only kind of intercourse now in my power with my friend."

Brown's skittishness contrasts with the less self-conscious tone of Gertrude Franklin Atherton's 1902 panegyric, *The Conqueror: Being the True and Romantic Story of Alexander Hamilton*. Despite its claim of veracity, the biography reads more like a novel, with copious invented dialogue and imagined thoughts of the characters.

Still, writing before the consciousness of homosexuality as a medical or identity category had made same-sex bonds suspect, Atherton presented the romantic relationship of the two young men straightforwardly, even effusively. She wrote that Laurens "took Hamilton by storm, capturing judgement as well as heart, and loving him as ardently in return."

Her views are never clearer than in her description of Hamilton's reaction to the death of Laurens. "Hamilton mourned him passionately, and never ceased to regret him . . . Betsey [Schuyler Hamilton] consoled, diverted, and bewitched him, but there were times when he would have exchanged her for Laurens." She adds, with some regret, "The perfect friendship of two men is the deepest and highest sentiment of which the finite mind is capable; women miss the best in life."

In Jonathan Katz's pioneering *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* (1976), the relationship between Hamilton and Laurens was for the first time read through the lens of a sophisticated understanding of same-sex love and sexual relationships as historically contingent. He places the letters in the social context of their time without excusing their effusive language as merely a convention or describing them in terms of brotherhood or idealized friendship.

Katz points out that, given the number of classical allusions in the letters, Hamilton and Laurens saw the model for their relationship as Greek, and suggests that these classical allusions may have been "one of the semisecret languages used by American homosexuals to speak of those same-sex relations otherwise unnameable among Christians."

The memory of Alexander Hamilton and John Laurens lives on at the Alexander Hamilton Post 448 of the American Legion in San Francisco, the only branch of the organization comprised primarily of glbtq veterans.

Despite the opposition of some other American Legion members, Post 448 received its charter in 1985. Since then they have regularly marched in both San Francisco's Gay Pride Parades and Veterans' Day Parades. They also sent contingents to the 1993 March on Washington and to the Stonewall 25 Parade in New York in 1994 and served as the color guard at Gay Games II in 1986. The members of Alexander Hamilton Post 448 are dedicated to the welfare of glbtq veterans and current service personnel and strongly advocate the repeal of the military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy.

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