

Alexander Hamilton's Smoking Gun

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PERHAPS no American icon has had more speculation raised (and dismissed) about his sexual orientation than Alexander Hamilton. This controversial Founding Father left behind an abundance of questions after dying a premature death following an ill-fated duel with political rival Aaron Burr. Hamilton's story is one that cries out for re-examination and that may be ripe for revision.

As was quite common for men of his social stature, Hamilton was a complex man of many talents. Soldier, economist, political philosopher, constitutional lawyer, secretary of the Treasury, leader of the Federalist Party, and founder of the U.S. Mint were just a few of the hats he wore. Hamilton's climb toward political prominence was forged by his exemplary service in the Revolutionary War. Initially acting as an artillery officer, he later became the senior aide-de-camp to General George Washington. Hamilton again served Washington, now commander-in-chief of the U.S., in 1794 during the Whiskey Rebellion tax revolt, acting as the president's closest military confidant. Three years later, he was unanimously named as Washington's successor as commander of the new American Army, which was mobilizing for a possible war with France. Fortunately, the need for such a force was neutralized by the stubborn diplomacy of President John Adams.

It was while serving on Washington's staff that Hamilton met John Laurens, the man with whom he had a relationship that has become the subject of much inquiry. Laurens was a successful soldier and statesman from South Carolina who gained approval from the Continental Congress in 1779 to recruit a regiment of 3,000 slaves by promising them freedom in return for fighting. Despite being married to Martha Manning, Laurens arrived in the colonies as a bachelor after leaving his wife behind in London. He joined the Continental Army and, following the Battle of Brandywine, was made an aide-de-camp to General Washington with the rank of lieutenant colonel. He also served with the Baron von Steuben (also rumored to be homosexual), doing reconnaissance at the outset of the Battle of Monmouth.

While on campaign, Laurens became close friends with his fellow aides, the Marquis de Lafayette and Alexander Hamilton. Whether his relationship with the latter was actively homosexual or only "homosocial" is the question at hand. Fueling the speculation is the fact that Hamilton has a reputation as an adulterer. In 1791 he admitted to participating in a scandalous affair with the wife of James Reynolds. In an effort to limit the political ramifications of his actions, he published a full con-

fession, shocking both his family and supporters by not merely admitting his guilt, but also by inexplicably narrating the affair with an unexpected level of detail. The public's reaction damaged Hamilton's standing for the rest of his life. That event, however, took place years after the untimely death of John Laurens in 1782.

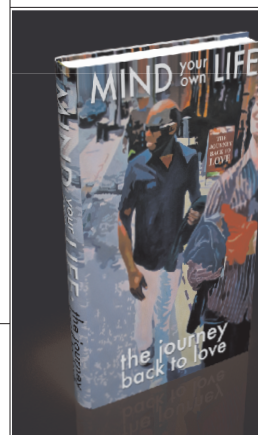
Historian Jonathan Ned Katz contends that the primary source in support of the Hamilton-Laurens relationship can be found in a series of intimate letters that were written shortly after Laurens left Washington's staff to return to his home state of South Carolina. His goal was to persuade the state's legislature to recruit African Americans, who were flocking to fight the Continentals as British Loyalists. Despite having no military reason to communicate, both men maintained their end of a lively correspondence.

Hamilton's first letter to Laurens was written in April of 1779 and appears to be filled with innuendo:

Cold in my professions—warm in my friendships—I wish, my Dear Laurens, it were in my power, by actions rather than words, to convince you that I love you. I shall only tell you that 'till you bade us Adieu, I hardly knew the value you had taught my heart to set upon you. Indeed, my friend, it was not well done. You know the opinion I entertain of mankind, and how much it is my desire to preserve myself free from particular attachments, and to keep my happiness independent of the caprice of others. You should not have taken advantage of my sensibility, to steal into my affections without my consent. But as you have done it, and as we are generally indulgent to those we love, I shall not scruple to pardon the fraud you have committed, on one condition; that for my sake, if not for your own, you will always continue to merit the partiality, which you have so artfully instilled into me. ...

And Now my Dear as we are upon the subject of wife, I empower and command you to get me one in Carolina. Such a wife as I want will, I know, be difficult to be found, but if you succeed, it will be the stronger proof of your zeal and dexterity. ...

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If you should not readily meet with a lady that you think answers my description you can only advertise in the public papers and doubtless you will hear of many ... who will be glad to become candidates for such a prize as I am. To excite their emulation, it will be necessary for you to give an account of the lover—his size, make, quality of mind and body, achievements, expectations, fortune, &c. In drawing my picture, you will no doubt be civil to your friend; mind you do justice to the length of my nose and don't forget, that I [about five words here have been mutilated in the manuscript—some scholars theorize that Hamilton was referring to his “manhood”].

After reviewing what I have written, I am ready to ask myself what could have put it into my head to hazard this *Jeu de folle*. Do I want a wife? No—I have plagues enough without desiring to add to the number that greatest of all; and if I were silly enough to do it, I should take care how I employ a proxy. Did I mean to show my wit? If I did, I am sure I have missed my aim. Did I only intend to [frisk]? In this I have succeeded, but I have done more. I have gratified my feelings, by lengthening out the only kind of intercourse now in my power with my friend. Adieu

Yours. A Hamilton

On September 11, 1779, Hamilton wrote a second letter in which he referred to himself as a “jealous lover”:

I acknowledge but one letter from you, since you left us, of the 14th of July which just arrived in time to appease a violent conflict between my friendship and my pride. I have written you five or six letters since you left Philadelphia and I should have written you more had you made proper return. But like a jealous lover, when I thought you slighted my caresses, my affection was alarmed and my vanity piqued. I had almost resolved to lavish no more of them upon you and to reject you as an inconstant and an ungrateful—. But you have now disarmed my resentment and by a single mark of attention made up the quarrel. You must at least allow me a large stock of good nature. ...

Have you not heard that I am on the point of becoming a benedict? I confess my sins. I am guilty. Next fall completes my doom. I give up my liberty to Miss [Elizabeth] Schuyler. She is a good hearted girl who I am sure will never play the termagant; though not a genius she has good sense enough to be agreeable, and though not a beauty, she has fine black eyes—is rather handsome and has every other requisite of the exterior to make a lover happy. And believe me, I am lover in earnest, though I do not speak of the perfections of my Mistress in the enthusiasm of Chivalry.

Is it true that you are confined to Pennsylvania? Cannot you pay us a visit? If you can, hasten to give us a pleasure which we shall relish with the sensibility of the sincerest friendship.

Adieu God bless you....

A Hamilton

The lads all sympathize with you and send you the assurances of their love.

One year later, on September 16, 1780, Hamilton penned a third correspondence to Laurens that appears to put his affections for the recipient above the ones he harbors for his current female mistress:

That you can speak only of your private affairs shall be no excuse for your not writing frequently. Remember that you write to your friends, and that friends have the same interests, pains, pleasures, sympathies; and that all men love egotism.



Statue of Alexander Hamilton and John Laurens, Lafayette Park, Philadelphia

In spite of Schyler's black eyes, I have still a part for the public and another for you; so your impatience to have me married is misplaced; a strange cure by the way, as if after matrimony I was to be less devoted than I am now. Let me tell you, that I intend to restore the empire of Hymen and that Cupid is to be his prime Minister. I wish you were at liberty to transgress the bounds of Pennsylvania. I would invite you after the fall to Albany to be witness to the final consummation. My Mistress is a good girl, and already loves you because I have told her you are a clever fellow and my friend; but mind, she loves you a *l'americaine* not a *la française* [*sic*].

Adieu, be happy, and let friendship between us be more than a name.

A Hamilton

The General & all the lads send you their love.

There are no other Hamilton–Laurens letters known to exist that are open to this kind of interpretation. The two men's relationship from here on in was relatively short-lived. Two years later, Laurens was killed during a skirmish, prompting a distraught and grieving Hamilton to state: “I feel the deepest affliction at the news we have just received of the loss of our dear and inestimable friend Laurens. His career of virtue is at an end. ... I feel the loss of a friend I truly and most tenderly loved, and one of a very small number.”

There are no eyewitness accounts of the men's interaction when they served together in the Continental Army, leaving the nature of their relationship open to debate. Do the letters refer to a homosexual entanglement during their service together, whether real or fantasized? In an essay titled “The Hamilton–Laurens Relationship,” Bob Arnebeck argues that these letters

prove nothing tangible, but do tell us something about Hamilton's fantasy life: "In the extant letters, this is the last of Hamilton's homoerotic bravado with Laurens. But it is quite enough to allow us to label Hamilton as a man with a wide appetite for pleasures that comfortably included homosexuality."

Jonathan Ned Katz's pioneering book *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* (1976), examines the relationship between Hamilton and Laurens through the understanding of same-sex love and sexual relationships as being historically contingent. He places the letters in the context of their time without dismissing their language as merely a "convention" of 18th-century male friendship. Turning this claim on its head, Katz argued that the innuendo in these letters constitute "one of the semi-secret languages used by early American homosexuals to speak of those same-sex relations otherwise unnamable among Christians." (Katz also claims that Hamilton may have had relations with Pierre L'Enfant, the French-born architect and civil engineer best known for designing the layout of the streets of Washington, D.C.)

That Hamilton enjoyed the company of women cannot, of course, be denied. In addition to his affair with Maria Reynolds, he later wed Elizabeth Schuyler and fathered eight children with her. She survived Hamilton by fifty years, dying in 1854. Eliza spent much of her life working to help widows and orphans. After Hamilton's death, she cofounded New York's first private orphanage, the New York Orphan Asylum Society. Whether Hamilton had youthful dalliances of a gay kind or not, it would appear that Elizabeth was completely unaware of any homosexual tendencies in her husband.

Hamilton died in a duel with Aaron Burr on July 12, 1804. A celebrated war hero and controversial politician (among many other things), he left behind a legacy that continues to divide critics to this day. From his dissenting posture as an ardent Federalist to his disruptions as a member of John Adams' cabinet, Hamilton does not enjoy the blanket adoration of some of the other "founding fathers." But as a calculating, adulterous, and potentially bisexual politician whose career was mired in suspicion, Hamilton would perhaps be more at home in today's political arena than that of his own time.

The Hamilton-Laurens bond has been forever captured in a sculpture that stands in Lafayette Park in Philadelphia. According to *The Queerest Places: A Guide to Gay and Lesbian Historic Sites*: "Lafayette Park also features statues of several prominent figures of the American Revolution, whom we now claim as gay. There is a statue of Alexander Hamilton and John Laurens, who were inseparable in life and whose hands in the statue appear to be lightly touching. The two were colonels in the Continental Army and together served as interpreters for Baron von Steuben, the Revolutionary War hero and lover of men."

Some organizations have implicitly accepted the premise of the Hamilton-Laurens relationship and used it as an example of gay historical icons in support of their cause. The Alexander Hamilton American Legion Post 448 in San Francisco is the only branch of the American Legion comprised primarily of GLBT people. Since 1985, members of Post 448 have marched in both the city's Gay Pride and Veterans Day parades and served as the Color Guard unit for the Gay Games. According to their website, "The members of Alexander Hamilton Post 448 are dedicated to the welfare of GLBT veterans and current serv-

ice personnel and strongly advocate the repeal of the military's 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' policy."


The significance of Hamilton's sexual orientation goes beyond armchair musing or theorizing. Now that California has passed a law known as SB48, which mandates that public schools in the state adopt textbooks that include the accomplishments of GLBT Americans, educators and publishers will be searching for historical figures who fit the bill. Even though it may not be possible to establish the exact nature of Hamilton's relationship with Laurens, the extreme intimacy of Hamilton's letters will certainly give students new insights into the possibilities for male bonding. Hamilton's letters to Laurens read like those of a man in love, and if the whole point of SB48 is to offer students a new set of perspectives, the love of one man for another is a fine place to start.

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