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**The Alexander Hamilton and Slavery Debate**

Jake Sowell

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Research Paper: First Draft

Research Seminar

Dr. Bethany Hicks

Alexander Hamilton, one of the original founding fathers, has been under scrutiny by historians for several years over his belief on the issue of slavery. Hamilton was one of the most influential people in the framing of the Constitution. He wrote many letters back and forth to James Madison while they wrote the *Federalist Papers*. Hamilton's opinion on the issue of slavery, unlike Madison's, is somewhat of a mystery. Some historians argue he was against slavery in principle and the presence of it in the United States, others say he supported slavery in its entirety.

Evidences for both sides of the argument are present, but the most recent scholarly arguments, which have come within the last decade, argue that Hamilton personally opposed slavery. However, he chose to follow the law on things such as returning a slave to their owner.

When asking a non-historian, "Who was Alexander Hamilton?" Most people are going to say either "The guy on the ten-dollar bill" or "The guy who got shot by the other guy in a duel." Though he is known for these two things (being on the ten-dollar bill and his death from a duel with Aaron Burr), Alexander Hamilton was much more than these two things. He was a man of many talents. During the American Revolution, he was, through his many political connections in New York, an aide for generals Nathaniel Greene, Henry Knox, and his favorite, General George Washington. Much like Marquis De Lafayette, Hamilton was thought of as a son that George Washington never had.

Hamilton was a very ambitious person during his time as Washington's aide. So much so that Washington would later say, "Of all my officers, this young aide has more ambitions and military ideas than any of my other officers combined."<sup>1</sup> Washington's notice of this is what allowed Hamilton to be one of the framers of the Battle of Yorktown in 1781.

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<sup>1</sup> Ron Chernow, "The Lovesick Colonel." *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 146.

Hamilton pleaded with Washington to allow him to lead an assault of three battalions on two British artillery battalions. Washington allowed Hamilton to be in command. As Hamilton was riding off to take command, Washington supposedly said something similar to “Good luck. Your assault victory determines the outcome of this battle and even the war.”<sup>2</sup> The exact quote is unknown.

Though Hamilton would win his assault, he turned in his resignation to Washington soon after. Hamilton felt that the war would not go on much longer and he wanted to spend more time with his new wife, Elizabeth. In July of 1782, Hamilton was chosen as a New York representative to the Congress of the Confederation. He would go on to serve this position for one year before resigning to start up his law practice in New York. Later on, Hamilton would be an assemblyman from New York County in the New York state legislature, where he became one of the state’s most outspoken supporters of the ratification of the United States Constitution. During his time as an assemblyman, Hamilton started to speak publicly about the issue of slavery in the United States. This would begin the confusion and debates on Hamilton and slavery.

Between the years of 1768 and 1789, Hamilton is very public about his opposition to slavery, though his wife owns at least one slave.<sup>3</sup> After the Constitution is ratified and the initiation of the federal government under the leadership of George Washington as President of the United States has begun, Hamilton as the first Secretary of the Treasury of the United States hardly ever mentions slavery outside of making sure slaves have adequate clothing for their day-

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathon Daniels, “Path to Glory.” *Ordeal of Ambition* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970), 33.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Hamilton, Harold Coffin Syrett, and Jacob Ernest Cooke, "To George Clinton," In *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*. v 2. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 642-643.

to-day lives.<sup>4</sup> Toward the end of his life (1795 to his death), Hamilton does not mention slavery as much as he did during the Revolution and Constitution years, but he does mention slavery more than he did as Secretary of the Treasury (1789-1795). The only contexts he mentions slaves and/or slavery is within his opposition of allowing them into the military during the time after his treasurer years.<sup>5</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the debates on Hamilton's views on slavery have been around for many years. Within the last decade or so, a new argument has risen from the "ashes" of two previous arguments. This new argument incorporates ideas from both of the previous arguments.

One of the dominant historians who still holds on in support of Hamilton's complete opposition to slavery in its entirety is Joseph J. Ellis. Ellis's book, *Founding Brothers: the Revolutionary Generation* is an in-depth look at how seven men really influenced the founding of the United States. He looks at George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, Aaron Burr, and Alexander Hamilton and how their relationships amongst one another led to debates, compromises, and even death to found the United States and its Constitution.

Ellis does a good job in examining the relationships and debates among the men, but when it comes to each individual person, he is very general and not as thorough as he is with their relation to one another. The Hamilton section, "The Duel," is very detailed on his relation with James Madison and their debate with each other on slavery.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Alexander Hamilton, Harold Coffin Syrett, and Jacob Ernest Cooke, "To Otho H. Williams," In *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*. v 9. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 370.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Hamilton, Harold Coffin Syrett, and Jacob Ernest Cooke, "To Charles Cotesworth Pinckney," In *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*. v 24. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 418-419.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph J. Ellis, "The Duel." *Founding Brothers: the Revolutionary Generation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 21.

Ellis's book is one that historians can use as a source to show the relation between Hamilton and Madison, Hamilton and Jefferson, and Hamilton and Washington over the issue of slavery. Ellis is considered to be one of the leading historians on Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, so his knowledge of these men is very thorough. Ellis pays attention to documents that Hamilton wrote from his time as an aide to George Washington through the New York ratification of the United States Constitution. Ellis has four primary documents that he really pays attention to. Understanding these documents really shows how Ellis sees that Hamilton was against slavery and did not want it in the United States.

One of those documents is a letter from Alexander Hamilton to John Jay.<sup>7</sup> It was written during the American Revolution on March 14, 1779. The letter was written as an update and a plea for help. The future of the Revolutionary War in the Southern colonies (i.e. the Carolinas and Virginia) was at a stake. Hamilton wrote this letter to get help for the South or the war would be lost.

The letter is giving John Jay an update on how the Revolution is going on in the South. Hamilton is also trying to get Jay to throw his support toward Colonel John Laurens in his task of raising two to four battalions of blacks in the Carolinas and Virginia, but specifically South Carolina in the context of this letter. Hamilton is trying to gain support from a person (Jay) that is very popular among the politicians in these states. Hamilton makes his case by arguing how effective black soldiers would be. He argues that they would be just as effective as white soldiers, especially with the promise of freedom attached. Hamilton pleads with Jay by explaining to him that the war in the South would be lost without these troops. This pleading that

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<sup>7</sup> Alexander Hamilton, Harold Coffin Syrett, and Jacob Ernest Cooke, "To John Jay," In *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*. v 2. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 17-19.

Hamilton makes is no so much emotional, but factual in that he gives Jay facts and statistics into why black soldiers would be effective. Hamilton discusses how freedom should be offered to the black soldiers that enlist.

Hamilton's letter has the idea that fighting a war equals freedom and the value that any man fighting deserves the best that can be. Modern readers go into this letter with the mindset that slavery is absolutely illegal and morally wrong, but a person during the time that this letter was written may have a completely opposite viewpoint. They may see slavery as being appropriate because it is an economic necessity.

Another document that Ellis uses for his argument is the minutes of a meeting of the Manumission Society on February 4, 1785, where Hamilton was in attendance.<sup>8</sup> These minutes are the first ones where Hamilton is first called out by name to do a job. These minutes were published for the Manumission Society's record keeping.

The minutes show the appointment of Alexander Hamilton to the "Committee to Report a Line of Conduct to be recommended to the members of the [manumission] society in relation to any slaves possessed by them..."<sup>9</sup> The goal was to show that it was Hamilton's responsibility to go after other members of the society who still owned slaves and make them set their slaves free. The audience was supposed to be other members of the society. This author is credible and reliable because it is the official minutes of an organization.

This source implies that because Hamilton was on this committee, he must have been against slavery and was prepared to make sure others in the society were too. Readers would think that because of this appointment, Hamilton was against slavery.

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<sup>8</sup> Alexander Hamilton, Harold Coffin Syrett, and Jacob Ernest Cooke, "Attendance at a Meeting of the Society for Promoting the Manumission of Slaves," In *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*. v 3. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 597.

<sup>9</sup> Hamilton, "Attendance at a Meeting of the Society for Promoting the Manumission of Slaves."

The third document that Ellis uses in his book is a short section in the New York legislature. On March 13, 1786, Hamilton and others signed a petition to abolish the slave trade in New York.<sup>10</sup> This source is part of the official minutes of the New York legislature from the mentioned date. These minutes are part of the legislature's record keeping.

The document is showing what members signed the petition to end the slave trade in New York. The audience is other members of the legislature. The author is credible and reliable because these are official minutes of the New York legislature.

The minutes give us the sense that Hamilton was against slavery, or at least the slave trade anyways. Readers come in with the mindset that most New Englanders were against slavery, so there shouldn't be a debate about within the legislature. The reliability and credibility of this document is good for it being the official minutes of the New York legislature.

The last document that Ellis uses a speech that Hamilton gave to the New York Ratifying Convention on June 20, 1788.<sup>11</sup> This source is in the New York state legislature's archives. Hamilton was required to give a written copy of his speech to the legislature just before he would give the speech.

Hamilton tries to persuade the ratifying convention to ratify the Constitution, but ask that Congress allow blacks in the South to have representation in Congress. He asks that blacks in the South be allowed to vote for their own representatives and have them serve in Congress. What he wants is that slaves have representatives whom they vote for. The audience is the members of the

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<sup>10</sup> Alexander Hamilton, Harold Coffin Syrett, and Jacob Ernest Cooke, "Memorial to Abolish the Slave Trade," In *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*. v 3. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 654.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander Hamilton, Harold Coffin Syrett, and Jacob Ernest Cooke, "New York Ratifying Convention, Remarks," In *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, v 5. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 23-24.



New York ratifying convention. The author of this is credible and reliable because this is the actual speech that Hamilton made to the convention.

Jonathon Daniels's book, *Ordeal of Ambition*, focuses on the triangle of Jefferson, Burr, and Hamilton and their ambitions. Daniels argues that their ambitions got the best of these men in their quest for power. He argues that these men sacrificed morals just to gain political power.

Daniels does a good job of showing how these men made moral sacrifices to gain power. He uses many examples to back this argument up. Daniels was Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Press Secretary; with this Daniels has a favorability of big government. This makes sense especially when Daniels is writing on the heels of the Great Depression, the New Deal, and World War II. At times, Daniels biases come in contact with the way he words things. He, at times, has trouble controlling those biases, but he is able to recognize when he is being biased in the book. He says things like, "Hamilton was a man who saw more government as a way to keep slavery intact and under control. He should be remembered for this observation and given the credit for noticing that people cannot function properly without the role of a large government to counteract that and put people under control."<sup>12</sup> Daniels plays off of one of the old arguments that Hamilton was for the presence of slavery and that he had no problems with it.

Two of the dominant documents that historians who believe that Alexander Hamilton supported slavery have are letters to George Clinton and Charles Cotesworth Pinckney. A letter written from Alexander Hamilton to George Clinton on May 22, 1781 is the first these historians use.<sup>13</sup> This letter is one of the few evidences that historians have that support the idea of

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<sup>12</sup> Jonathon Daniels, "The Golden Chain." *Ordeal of Ambition* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1970), 17.

<sup>13</sup> Hamilton, "To George Clinton," 642.

Hamilton supporting slavery. The letter makes an implication that very few letters make, that is Elizabeth Hamilton (Alexander's wife) owned at least one slave during their marriage.

The purpose of the letter is Hamilton is trying to receive the payment of a slave sold by Mrs. Hamilton to Lt. Colonel Udney Hay. This slave was owned by Mrs. Hamilton, but was "leased" to Mrs. Clinton (Alexander's sister-in-law). The letter is a very polite and an understanding letter that has the intent of saying the money will be coming in due time. George Clinton is married to Alexander's sister-in-law. The reader assumes that George Clinton and Alexander Hamilton have been concerned about the payment of a slave for some time.

Conflicting the previous letters, this letter shows that Hamilton thought of slaves as property or he wouldn't want the payment that he is owed. Modern readers would find the idea of Hamilton having slaves as immoral, but the idea that he considers them property and is willing to sell them for a profit is dehumanizing. During Hamilton's time, it was not unheard of for people to sell slaves for profit.

This letter does cause the reader to question Hamilton and his beliefs. This letter is reliable because Hamilton was very particular when it came to money transactions. Money was very important to Hamilton. Being paid and saving was two of his biggest things in reference to money. For these reasons, Hamilton's credibility is not scarred, just reexamined and maybe reinterpreted.

This letter from Alexander Hamilton to Charles Cotesworth Pinckney on April 21, 1800 is the other letter that historians use. This letter is sent in response to Pinckney, the new Deputy Inspector General, because he has requested that he be sent two regiments to his headquarters to help with repairs.

In this letter, Hamilton is giving Pinckney permission to use the two regiments that were requested and any more troops he may need. Hamilton responds to Pinckney's request for black troops to be sent to his headquarters, but Hamilton believes that it is "not...proper that men of [color] should be enlisted."<sup>14</sup> Hamilton's reliability is not an issue, but his credibility starts to come into question because he had the complete opposite opinion during the Revolution with his letter to John Jay mentioned earlier.<sup>15</sup>

This letter implies that Hamilton thought that blacks were not fit to serve in the military. Hamilton argues that " [he thinks it could not be] proper to depart from the general rule which has been established."<sup>16</sup> Readers come with the idea that it is okay for any race to serve in the military, but people during the time of this letter thought that blacks in the military was unheard of.

A letter from Alexander Hamilton to John Chaloner is one of the letters that both sides of the old debate use.<sup>17</sup> This letter is one where Hamilton has been instructed by his sister-in-law, Mrs. Angelica Schuyler Church, to get in touch with John Chaloner to buy back a slave named Ben from Major William Jackson and return the slave to Hamilton for him to return the slave to his sister-in-law.

Hamilton is trying to buy back a slave for his sister-in-law by trying to persuade John Chaloner that the slave is a necessity for Mrs. Church. He tries to tell him that Mrs. Church's household can't function without this particular slave. John Chaloner, it is assumed, is very close to Major Jackson.

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<sup>14</sup> Hamilton, "To Charles Cotesworth Pinckney," 418.

<sup>15</sup> Hamilton, "To John Jay," 17-19.

<sup>16</sup> Hamilton, "To Charles Cotesworth Pinckney," 418.

<sup>17</sup> Alexander Hamilton, Harold Coffin Syrett, and Jacob Ernest Cooke, "To John Chaloner," In *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*. v 3. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 584-585.

Within the context of this letter, Hamilton's view of slaves as property is up in the air. Some historians say that this letter shows Hamilton thought of slaves as property, but others believe this shows Hamilton was just doing something nice for his sister-in-law. People during the time of this letter, most likely, would view this letter as Hamilton just doing something for his sister-in-law while modern readers would look at this as an endorsement of Hamilton believes slaves are property, but the new debate that has risen within the last decade or so takes the opinion that Hamilton within this letter was just doing something nice for his sister-in-law.

Two men who are at the forefront of the new idea are Michael D. Chan and James Oliver Horton. Both of these men have done extensive research on Alexander Hamilton within their history careers. Horton, for example, is one of the leading Hamilton historians and he is also the official Alexander Hamilton historian for the New York Historical Society. These men along with several other historians are the ones who have introduced the idea that Hamilton was morally against slavery, but within the context of the law, he would follow the law instead of "fighting" the law.

Chan's article, "Alexander Hamilton on Slavery," tries to overturn the conventional wisdom that the founding fathers did not have a deep concern for the abolition of slavery.<sup>18</sup> He argues that Hamilton specifically saw the immorality of slavery, but saw the slow emancipation of it as a Constitutional necessity.

Chan does a wonderful job of articulating the slavery debate that was going on during the Constitutional Convention through the primary sources that he used. His article is mostly secondary sources with very few primary sources, but the quality of primary sources is important to note. The primary sources he used are a newly discovered diary and letters that have not been

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<sup>18</sup> Michael Chan, "Alexander Hamilton on Slavery," *Review of Politics* [66, no. 2 (2004)], 207-231.

reproduced or put out there for public use. Chan had access to these documents because he was one of the first historians given permission to look at these for their authentication. His responsibility was basically to prove that these documents were Hamilton's.

James Oliver Horton argues in his article, "Alexander Hamilton: Slavery and Race in a Revolutionary Generation," that Hamilton's childhood in the West Indies holds the key to Hamilton's belief on the issue of slavery.<sup>19</sup> He argues that Hamilton's upbringing in a place full of slavery really sheds light on Hamilton. He argues that historians are looking in the wrong places to find evidence of Hamilton's belief. Horton believes that historians should examine primary sources of Hamilton's childhood and from those historians will make the argument that Hamilton was against slavery, but he based his public life on what the United States Constitution said. The biggest argument for Horton is that he believes there should be no debate on Hamilton's belief because of the above-mentioned reasons.

He believes that historians are basically wasting their time on debating Hamilton's views of slavery because, as Horton argues, "If historians want to know the truth, they must quit arguing and must read the Hamiltonian documents."<sup>20</sup> Horton really gives insight into the debate that has been happening in the historical realm on Hamilton's belief. The reader should be aware of that Horton focuses on what other historians are doing wrong not what he, specifically, is doing right or wrong. It is like he is telling other historians to do the work rather than himself.

Alexander Hamilton is like Thomas Jefferson when a historian is trying to figure out their views on slavery, there is no cut and dry answer: he supported it or he opposed it. Historians many times will go into research with a certain mindset about a person, and they will come to

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<sup>19</sup> James Horton, "Alexander Hamilton: Slavery and Race in a Revolutionary Generation," *New York Journal of American History* [1, no. 3 (2004)]. 16-24.

<sup>20</sup> Horton, "Alexander Hamilton: Slavery and Race in a Revolutionary Generation," 18.

find out it is complicated. This writer learned that while doing the research for this paper. This writer went in with the mindset that Hamilton was against slavery when come to find out it's a little more complicated than that.

To use the social science cliché, “Well, it depends.” Hamilton’s views really depend on what part of his life you are talking about. From his childhood through the ratification of the United States constitution in New York, Hamilton was very public about his opposition to slavery. During his years as Secretary of the Treasury, he hardly ever mentioned slavery. After his time as Secretary until his death, he never really gave his personal opinion other than saying, “Whatever the law says.”

Through the many sources that I have examined and studied throughout this paper, I have come to the conclusion that an analysis of this debate is necessary to understand the true impact of Alexander Hamilton as a founding father. Whether it is Joseph Ellis’s, Michael Chan’s, Jonathan Daniels’s, and/or James Horton’s opinion, the debate and these opinions give historians and readers an idea of why we must continue the study of Hamilton. This paper adds to the debate by bringing in the trends in scholarship in line with the narrative that has been constructed of Hamilton and his views of slavery over time.

I recognize that I cannot answer all the questions about Hamilton and slavery. I have used the sources that show he changes his view, but I can’t tell you why he does it. This paper doesn’t try to answer these questions for that is left up to the historians actually studying Hamilton and slavery. This paper’s main goal is to put all the debates into one to be studied as equals. Through this, historians can study all the arguments as equals and make their own interpretations. Historians are not being persuaded to choose one argument over the others. They are being

encouraged to add their own argument(s) to the debate from studying the other arguments that are out there.

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