

---

Honors Projects and Presentations: Undergraduate

---

Spring 2022

## Masculinity, Male Friendship, and Same-Sex Interactions in 18th Century America: The Relationship of Alexander Hamilton and John Laurens

Chloe Kauffman  
*Messiah University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://mosaic.messiah.edu/honors>



Part of the [Political History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Permanent URL: <https://mosaic.messiah.edu/honors/373>

---

### Recommended Citation

Kauffman, Chloe, "Masculinity, Male Friendship, and Same-Sex Interactions in 18th Century America: The Relationship of Alexander Hamilton and John Laurens" (2022). *Honors Projects and Presentations: Undergraduate*. 373.

<https://mosaic.messiah.edu/honors/373>

### Sharpening Intellect | Deepening Christian Faith | Inspiring Action

Messiah University is a Christian university of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society. This content is freely provided to promote scholarship for personal study and not-for-profit educational use.

Masculinity, Male Friendship, and Same-Sex Interactions in 18<sup>th</sup>-Century America: The  
Relationship of Alexander Hamilton and John Laurens

Chloe Kauffman

Department of History, Politics, and International Relations

Messiah University

Masculinity, Male Friendship, and Same-Sex Interactions in 18<sup>th</sup>-Century America: The  
Relationship of Alexander Hamilton and John Laurens

AN HONORS THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY, POLITICS,  
AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, MESSIAH UNIVERSITY IN PARTIAL  
FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF A DEPARTMENTAL HONORS PROJECT

May 2022

Chloe Kauffman

---

John Fea, Ph.D.  
Thesis Supervisor

Alongside the dawning of the American Revolution and the burgeoning Republic, young, educated men found themselves engaged in intimate friendships formed in the founding moments of the new nation. These young men, often revolutionaries like John Laurens and Alexander Hamilton, constructed relationships rivaling marriages in the depth of their intimacy. Even Hamilton, who notoriously lavished affection upon his wife, Elizabeth Schuyler, wrote Laurens about his engagement to Eliza, assuring him of his continued affection: “In spite of Schuyler’s black eyes, I have still a part for the public and another for you [Laurens].”<sup>1</sup> Hamilton biographer Ron Chernow writes that Hamilton’s relationship with Laurens was so important to his life that after Laurens’s untimely death, “...Hamilton shut off some compartment of his emotions and never reopened it.”<sup>2</sup> Built under unique circumstances, “heroic friendships” like that of Laurens and Hamilton raise questions of masculinity and same-sex intimacy in eighteenth-century America.

The relationship between Laurens and Hamilton was forged in a time of rapid and drastic change. Political revolution was not the only movement sweeping through the colonies and eventual new nation – in fact, the eighteenth century marked a time of great shifting in the understandings of gender and sexuality. A “sexual revolution” coincided with the end of the American Revolution, bringing about increased sexual leniency and adjusted expectations for marriages and courtships. Within the sexual revolution, the conceptualizations of gender were ever-changing to fit the new boundaries, fears, and freedoms in which men and women were socially designated. All of this change also influenced eighteenth-century understanding of same-

---

<sup>1</sup> Ham to Laurens 16 Sept 1780

<sup>2</sup> Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 173.

sex sexuality.”<sup>3</sup> As research advances in this history of early American sexuality, scholars are faced with the question of where to fit the “heroic/romantic friendship” into the broader narrative of male love and sexuality. By examining the lives and relationships of young men engaged in heroic friendships, such as Alexander Hamilton and John Laurens, several scholars have concluded that “heroic friendship” was a legitimate expression of same-sex romantic/sexual love that often exceeded platonic boundaries, even within the expectations of eighteenth century masculinity.

Large cities such as Philadelphia and New York were rife with a “sexually deviant” underbelly during the mid-to-late eighteenth century. While some scholars debate if there was truly a definable “homosexual subculture,” it is impossible to ignore the undercurrent of same-sex sexuality present in the early national period. Most of the discourse surrounding sexuality was only extended to men. Men, in the eyes of eighteenth-century Americans, were innately given social, relational, and sexual power in their masculinity. The balance of heterosexual relationships was maintained by the man assuming all masculine roles in the public and private life of the couple, including sexual activity. Conversely, the other half of the relationship, the woman, would assume all feminine roles. Masculinity was integral to the social wealth of the eighteenth-century man – it encompassed not only personal identity, but public image. Despite this emphasis on masculine power, however, men could “revoke” their masculinity through

---

<sup>3</sup> Broadly understood and accepted as a transitory period between a religious-based understanding of sexual sins and the nineteenth-century medicalization of homosexuality, the eighteenth century encompasses a wide variety of understandings and expectations regarding same-sex intimacy. Coinciding with the Age of Sensibility and the normalcy of effusive male friendships existing in the middle and upper classes of America and Europe, studying male same-sex intimacy during the eighteenth century is an understandably murky experience. Numerous scholars have investigated both gender, sexuality, social location, class, friendships, and other factors that contribute to deciphering same-sex sexuality during such a time of ambiguity, compiling theories of how men interacted intimately and whether or not their actions could be deemed “homosexual,” “homoerotic,” or merely the product of platonic male friendship in the eighteenth century.

assuming the “feminine” role in a sexual relationship. If a man were to consent to taking the woman’s role in sexual intercourse – that is, receiving penetration – he would be committing a social atrocity. Since a woman could therefore not reject her femininity through sexual intercourse, most eighteenth-century Americans envisioned same-sex sexuality as a sphere in which mostly men engaged. Notably, one’s sexuality was not considered to be a part of personal identity in the eighteenth century. In early American culture, “sexual orientation” was not yet a concept. Undoubtedly, there were individuals who experienced same-sex attraction and engaged in same-sex sexual contact, but the idea of the “homosexual” only began to form in the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> The maintenance of gendered power was necessary to the social and political functions of the new nation, and for individuals to willingly forfeit such positions of power was unthinkable for the larger public. Therefore, it was nearly impossible for the citizens of the new nation to comprehend a same-sex relationship outside of the context of depraved, unnatural encounters.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, there were other factors that determined why same-sex sexuality was, to early American society, innately vile. Christian ministers believed that sodomy was a sexual sin that, like adultery and self-pollution, equally tempted all people. It was assumed that every individual

---

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (United Kingdom: New Press, 1997), 171. Foucault briefly discusses eighteenth-century homoeroticism in the context of identity formation and friendship.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Godbeer, *Sexual Revolution in Early America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); Clare Lyons, *Sex among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730-1830* (United States: Omohundro Institute and University of North Carolina Press, 2012); William Benemann, *Male-Male Intimacy in Early America: Beyond Romantic Friendships* (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2006); Greta Lafleur, ““Sex and “Unsex”: Histories of Gender Trouble in Eighteenth-Century North America.” *Early American Studies* 12, no. 3 (Fall 2014):469-499. Accessed November 21, 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24474867>. Karen Harvey, “The Century of Sex? Gender, Bodies, and Sexuality in the Long Eighteenth Century.” *The Historical Journal* 45, no. 4 (Dec., 2002): 899-916. Accessed November 21, 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3133533>; G.S. Rousseau, “The Pursuit of Homosexuality in the Eighteenth Century: “Utterly Confused Category” and/or Rich Repository?” in *‘Tis Nature’s Fault: Unauthorized Sexuality during the Enlightenment*, ed. Robert Purks Maccubbin (Virginia: The College of William and Mary, 1985), 132-168.

struggled with same-sex attraction, therefore making it able to be dismissed as a “normal” facet of sin. However, this perspective was decreasing in its popularity as the eighteenth century continued, as same-sex sexuality became known as “deviant behavior” that was individualized, no longer a universal sexual temptation. As the Enlightenment spread throughout Europe and America, the self was put at the center of human existence. With such developments, the understanding of sodomy evolved to match the individuality of Enlightenment thinking. Still, sexuality as an aspect of identity formation only emerges in the early nineteenth century, so “the homosexual” or “the sodomite” as a figure only became a tangible threat to the order of society around the turn of the century. Therefore, in the mid-to-late eighteenth century, those who were romantically or sexually involved with a member of the same sex did not think of themselves as identifying with a sexual orientation, but instead may have thought their actions stemmed from sin or perceived abnormality.<sup>6</sup>

Historian Clare Lyons, in her effort to make sense of the same-sex sexuality in Atlantic port city of Philadelphia and connect such desire to larger trends in the Europe, has identified has identified “four recognized forms that same-sex intimacy could take.”<sup>7</sup> British-American sexual roles developed in conversation with these four forms, beginning with the “aristocratic libertine

---

<sup>6</sup> Richard Godbeer, *Sexual Revolution in Early America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); Colin L. Talley, “Gender and Male Same-Sex Erotic Behavior in British North America in the Seventeenth Century.” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 6, no. 3 (Jan., 1996): 385-408. Accessed November 21, 2021, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/4629616>.

While much of Richard Godbeer’s article speaks to pre-eighteenth century American understandings of same-sex sexuality, his findings provide informative background for the culture that phased into the eighteenth century. Namely, Godbeer provides ample research surrounding two specific topics – the separation of sodomy from any formative identity or orientational ideas of human sexuality, and the importance put on social disruption when prosecuting individuals for sodomy. Before the identity of the “homosexual” was defined in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, sexual acts were not ascribed to any pathological desire or intrinsic predilection to people of the same sex. What Godbeer presents, however, is that the New England clergy of the seventeenth century (and early eighteenth century) did not distinguish sodomy from any other sexual sin.

<sup>7</sup> Clare Lyons, “Mapping an Atlantic Sexual Culture: Homoeroticism in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia.” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (Jan., 2003): 126. Found in *Long Before Stonewall: Histories of Same-Sex Sexuality in Early America* (United States: NYU Press, 2007).

rake” of the seventeenth century – an ultra-masculine man of the elite class who took both men and women to bed. The libertine rake was most recognized in the royal courts, with male nobility calling upon both young men and women to fulfill their sexual desires.

The next category, the “sodomite,” was seen as a devious figure who lurked in subcultures, visiting molly houses and “cruising” in public areas.<sup>8</sup> By the end of eighteenth-century, the sodomite was a common figure in American society, but he only was a threat to everyday life when sexuality merged with personal identity, becoming a “sexual orientation.” Lyons determines that such a shift only began to occur in the late eighteenth century, flourishing in the nineteenth along with the medicalization and conceptualization of the “homosexual.”<sup>9</sup> According to Lyons, “The sodomite was the most publicized of the four recognized forms [of same-sex intimacy].”<sup>10</sup> While male sexual attraction was integral to the idea of the sodomite, it was not considered a “pathological innate sexual inclination;” Lyons explains that the pathology of male same-sex desire was only necessary to the identity of the nineteenth-century “homosexual,” not the sodomite.<sup>11</sup> In contrast to the libertine rake, the sodomite defied class boundaries, with men from differing classes interacting in a consensual, sexual relationship.<sup>12</sup>

Another form of same-sex intimacy, the “effeminate fop,” was similar to the libertine rake, but situated on opposite ends of the spectrum of gender. Where the libertine rake’s intense sexual drive allowed him to demonstrate masculine dominance over both women and men, the effeminate fop’s femininity verged on a disruption of the social structure of gender. By taking

---

<sup>8</sup> Clare Lyons, “Mapping an Atlantic Sexual Culture: Homoeroticism in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia.” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (Jan., 2003): 123-125. Found in *Long Before Stonewall: Histories of Same-Sex Sexuality in Early America* (United States: NYU Press, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 126.

upon himself the image of a woman – often using a feminine name, occasionally cross-dressing, and willingly taking a submissive role in sexual relations with men, the effeminate fop was a danger to the carefully-constructed gender order of eighteenth-century society.<sup>13</sup>

The final form of same-sex sexuality that Lyons discusses is the heroic friendship, which she considers the “most legitimate” form of same-sex relations in early America. Formed out of intimate, emotionally tied friendships between men of the middle and upper classes, the heroic friendship was a signifier of class, power, and education. Additionally, Lyons notes that the unique social positions of those who entered into heroic friendships allowed for privacy from public scrutiny and “...cast their relationships in a positive light.”<sup>14</sup> Under the guise of friendship, men would be able to interact romantically and sexually, without raising public concern,– due their higher social status and value as members of the community. Heroic friendships lacked the power dynamics and social disorder essential to the functioning of the other three recognized expressions of same-sex intimacy. Balance was foundational to its makeup – the two men involved were of the same class, wealth, age, and education. They neither disrupted gender roles nor modeled Greek pederastic practices; but rather reflected ancient views that centered male relationships around honor and civic pride. Often started in young adulthood, the heroic/romantic friendship was a space for erudite men to share in intelligence and camaraderie, a relationship built on exchanging knowledge and proving oneself “useful” to society.

Philadelphians, Lyons argues, were well-informed about eighteenth-century European homoerotic types through popular literature and the ways same-sex behavior was handled in the

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

courts. Authorities in London, Paris, The Hague, and Amsterdam actively persecuted sodomites, but Philadelphians were relatively tolerant of those who embraced homoerotic practices. In “The City of Brotherly Love”, meaning of homoeroticism had not solidified around a set of attributes delineating a social type as it had in Europe with the creation of a new deviant actor, the sodomite. In eighteenth-century Philadelphia, homoerotic desire and behavior remained malleable categories open to multiple meanings and interpretation.<sup>15</sup>

Lyons departs from most academic interpretations of eighteenth-century American and European sexuality in by calling attention to four legitimized forms of same-sex intimacy. She theorizes that heroic friendship is a valid category of same-sex expression that extends beyond mere platonic boundaries. She argues that widespread intimate friendships between men—and the romantic and sexual behavior that came with such friendships-- were often shielded by the participant’s social status and their value to the community. Lyons is one of the few academics to connect romantic and sexual love to male friendship. Her nuanced argument expands the definition of the heroic friendship to include how such relationships could have allowed for a further expression of male love.

Born out of wedlock on the island of St. Kitts and Nevis on January 11<sup>th</sup>, 1757, Alexander Hamilton’s life was worlds away from his eventual success in adulthood.<sup>16</sup> After his mother’s death on February 19, 1768, the eleven-year-old orphan went to live with his cousin. Just one year later, his cousin committed suicide, leaving Hamilton under the care of a local merchant. Eventually, Hamilton proved himself to be a prolific and talented writer, earning the favor of locals via a letter he penned following a devastating hurricane in August of 1772. The

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 149.

<sup>16</sup> Hamilton also could have been born in 1755. His birth year is highly debated.

community came together to fund Hamilton's voyage to the colonies and education. He studied at King's College, now Columbia University, until the British occupation of New York City forced the college to shut down temporarily. Soon after the beginning of the war, General Washington asked Hamilton to join his staff as an aide-de-camp.<sup>17</sup>

During the war, Hamilton served as Washington's chief staff aid, writing letters to Congress and other key figures in the war effort. He was also involved in war strategy and served as a translator between the French allies and the English-speaking army personnel. Despite his integral role in the off-field efforts of the Continental Army, Hamilton yearned for battlefield command. He was not granted permission to fight alongside the army until the Battle of Yorktown, where he defended Redoubt Ten alongside fellow aide John Laurens. Following the Battle of Yorktown, Hamilton resigned from his position as an aide to Washington and returned home. Now, in 1782, he had a family to attend to outside of his public affairs. In December of 1780, Hamilton married New York socialite Elizabeth Schuyler, both a marriage of love and social advantage. Eliza gave birth to their first child, Philip, on January 22, 1782 while Alexander was still engaged with the war effort. The couple would go on to have eight children over the course of the next twenty years.<sup>18</sup> After the war, Hamilton would quickly transition into the political sphere, serving in numerous positions throughout the first few decades of the new nation's government.<sup>19</sup>

On October 28, 1754, John Laurens was born into a vastly different social situation than Hamilton. The Laurens family of South Carolina was one of the wealthiest families in British

---

<sup>17</sup> Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> To read more on the life of Alexander Hamilton, see works such as Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004).

colonial America, amassing a fortune from their deep involvement in the slave trade. In fact, Henry Laurens, John's father, was the single highest importer of slaves during the colonial period. Life on Mepkin Plantation, the Laurens' family home, was not without its tragedies. Of Eleanor Ball Laurens's (John's mother) twelve pregnancies, only seven children survived infancy, and only two made it past thirty years of age. John's first encounter with death occurred when his older brother, Henry, passed away when John was only four years old. Six years later, his younger sister Nelly also died. The Laurens family tragedies would not cease, however, for in 1770 Eleanor Laurens died of health complications from childbirth. Following his wife's death, Henry Laurens looked to his eldest surviving son John to assist him in raising the younger children. He lamented to John, "In a word you are the Man, the proper Man to be my friend while I Live, & the friend of my younger family after my Death, you therefore on whom, next to God, I rely, will meditate on the subject & endeavour to qualify your self for the discharging the Duty which may be required from you." John lived-up to his father's wishes. He became the primary caretaker for his four younger siblings. When he transitioned to college life in Geneva, and then to law school in London, his two brothers traveled with him as his dependents.<sup>20</sup>

Understandably, John cared deeply about his father's opinion and desired to live a life that was pleasing to him. In the mid-to-late eighteenth century, "...traditions of domestic subordination— children to their parents, wives to their husbands—were slowly eroding. In their place more affectionate and egalitarian relationships became the norm." John and Henry's relationship walked a fine line between the more traditional "domestic subordination" and the affectionately egalitarian bond. Although Henry considered John his "second in command" and

---

<sup>20</sup> On Laurens's life, see Gregory Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2000).

his “Best Friend,” he still expected the young man to conform to his instructions and values, especially prior to John’s involvement in the war. Tensions emerged when John continually fell short of Henry’s moral expectations of him— specifically, sexual virtue and the virtue of usefulness.<sup>21</sup>

Against Henry’s wishes, John became an avid reader of pamphlets and literature such as Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*, telling his father that he had read it “more than once.” He quickly became an ardent supporter of the American cause, arguing enthusiastically on its behalf to his friends and to his father. Henry feared that his son would want to join the American rebellion and insisted that he remain in his studies, to which John responded, “I labour to qualify myself for the Profession to which you have destined me.” John’s snide comment would not ring true for long, for on December 27<sup>th</sup>, 1776, he began his journey back to America, having already informed the Middle Temple of his intention to forgo his remaining year of law studies – without parental permission. Instead, he sent Henry a letter informing him that he would be returning to South Carolina promptly, and due to the significant time it took for letters to be delivered overseas, Henry was only informed of John’s decision shortly before he arrived in America.

In that same letter, John decided to let his father know of yet another circumstance of concern. Before leaving for the colonies, John fathered a daughter out of wedlock with Martha Manning. The Mannings were family friends of the Laurenses, and John often visited them while in England. William Manning, the father of the Manning girls, acted as a mentor and parental figure to John during his time in Europe. John was relatively close to all the Manning girls – Sarah, Elizabeth, and Martha--but a friend of the Mannings, John Baker, noted John’s particular

---

<sup>21</sup> Richard Bell, *We Shall Be No More* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 31.

affection for Martha in a November 1775 diary entry, However, John was notably quiet about his relationship with Martha to both his father and his friends. It thus came as a shock to Henry when John wrote him October 26, 1776, letting him know that he had married Martha Manning and that she was pregnant with their child. John wrote, “Will you forgive me Sir for adding a Daughter in Law to your Family without first asking your Consent. I must reserve particulars ‘till I have the pleasure of seeing you. My Wife Mr Manning’s youngest Daughter promises soon to give you a Grand Child.” At the time of their marriage, Martha was about five months pregnant. John explained the situation more directly to his Uncle James, writing,

Pity has obliged me to marry. But a Consideration of the Duty which I owe to my Country made me choose a Clandestine Celebration lest the Father should insist upon my Stay in this Country as a Condition of the Marriage. The Matter has proceeded too far to be longer concealed and I have this morning disclosed the Affair to Mr Manning in plain terms, reserv[ing] to myself a Right of fulfilling the more important Engagements to my Country.

Obviously, John was much more concerned with pleading the cause of the Revolution than he was with Martha and his future child. Massey explains, “While John expressed pity, noticeably absent from this passage were any feelings of love for the young woman in question, Martha Manning.” Even within his message to his Uncle James, John made it abundantly clear which issue had priority in his mind.<sup>22</sup>

Unfortunately, John would never see Martha again, and would never meet his daughter, Frances Eleanor Laurens. Martha made several attempts to join John in America, and he did once attempt to secure her safe passage through her father. However, William Manning responded to

---

<sup>22</sup> Gregory Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), 47; John Laurens to Henry Laurens, 26 October 1776, in *Laurens Papers*, 11: 227, quoted in Gregory Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), 67, John Laurens to James Laurens, 25 October 1776, Kendall Collection, quoted in *ibid.*, 68; *ibid.*

his request by explaining the dangers of her travels from the Caribbean to Charleston, though he believed he could arrange safe travels from England to the West Indies. Ultimately, he told John that “I would by no means have her venture till peace is restored to us, & even then I should not think it prudent . . . without you come for her.” There was no way John was going to leave his duty to his country, therefore, the final means for Martha to arrive in America would be through a family planning to return home from England. John wrote his wife,

However great our unhappiness be, in consequence of our Separation, I can never consent my dearest love, that you should expose yourself to all the dangers which now attend a Sea Voyage in a common Vessel and without the guardianship of a particular Friend. Reflect for a moment into how much misery we might both be plunged by your captivity, and say dear Girl whether it will not be better to endure the pain of absence patiently, ‘till some eligible opportunity offer.

Martha eventually found such a possibility in William Blake, a native Carolinian who had plans to return to America. Laurens biographer Gregory Massey writes, “Showing more concern for Martha than did her husband, Henry worried about the young woman landing in Carolina without the benefit of family or friends to assist her.” John had not yet arranged to meet her in South Carolina when the Blake family decided to maintain allegiance to England, thus staying there permanently. Therefore, Martha’s final option to join John in America was removed.<sup>23</sup>

Later, in 1781, Martha would try once again to meet John and introduce him to their daughter. While he was on a diplomatic mission in France, Martha made the trip from England to meet him, unfortunately never crossing paths before John returned to America. Martha, already ill, would stay in France until her death in late 1781. Unfortunately, there is no record of John’s reaction to her death. As Massey states, “From his [John’s] perspective, it was a marriage born of

---

<sup>23</sup> William Manning to John Laurens, 12 July 1777, John Laurens Papers, South Carolina Historical Society, quoted in *ibid.*, 79; John Laurens to Martha Manning Laurens, 9 November 1777, London, Public Record Office, HCA 32/392, quoted in *ibid.*; *ibid.*

duty and honor, not deep and abiding love.” Massey followed this statement by raising questions pertaining to John’s response to Martha’s death. He writes, “Did Laurens feel guilt? Did he think of a five-year-old daughter he had never seen, who now became his charge? Did he reflect on his private foibles, such as the failure to resist sexual temptation, despite repeated warnings from his father, or his abandonment of his wife and child? The questions linger, the answers remain elusive.” Yet again, John demonstrated how his wife and child occupied little space in his mind while he was in America.<sup>24</sup>

Without literal confirmation, scholars can only deliberate as to how John felt and why he had no apparent response to his wife’s death. However, there is a possibility that was not raised in Massey’s list of suggestions: Did John not truly love Martha not just because his duty to his country came first, but possibly because he was simply not attracted to women? It was painfully obvious, as Massey also acknowledges, that John did not marry Martha for love. During their marriage, he postponed her arrival to America numerous times, eluded meeting her in France, and wrote to her extremely infrequently. Throughout his life, John was rarely recorded to have spoken of any women, even writing about Martha on only a few rare occasions. Considering his apparent lack of interest in forming intimate relationships with women, it can be posited that Laurens may have only experienced same-sex attraction. In comparison to Hamilton, whose womanizing efforts were undoubtedly notorious, Laurens continued to surround himself with young men and almost never spoke of any woman in his day-to-day communication – including his own wife.

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 215.

While at Geneva for law school, John's two closest friends were South Carolina native Francis Kinloch and Swiss mathematics teacher Louis de Manoel de Vegobre. Laurens maintained an affectionate relationship with both men, but especially Francis Kinloch. Despite their friendship, however, Laurens and Kinloch came to odds when discussing the American Revolution: "You and I may differ my Dear Kinloch in our political Sentiments but I shall always love you from the Knowledge I have of your Heart," John wrote to him on April 16<sup>th</sup>, 1776. John, the ardent patriot, and Francis, the loyalist, quickly grew apart despite John's warm sentiments. Kinloch initiated the split in a response to John's letter, explaining, "...whatever may be your idea of my manner of thinking in political affairs, don't let that hinder you from telling me yours, and I promise to be as free with you: we hold too fast by one anothers hearts, my dear Laurens, to be afraid of exposing our several opinions to each other... Be certain that I never shall forget you." Despite the affection that was still clearly present, Laurens and Kinloch lost communication after this letter.<sup>25</sup> Arguably, Francis Kinloch was Laurens's first recorded heroic friendship, despite a lack of contextual material to discuss their relationship beyond the few letters available.

Although any evidence of a romantic relationship between Laurens and Kinloch is merely theoretical, Kinloch was closely associated with men who entertained homoerotic attachments to one another. After Laurens left for South Carolina, Francis moved into a house that he shared with three other men, Johannes von Muller, Charles Victor de Bonstetten, and Alleyne Fitzherbert. Fitzherbert never married, and Muller and Bonstetten appeared to be involved in an

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 40; John Laurens to Francis Kinloch, 12 April 1776. Transcription provided by Gregory Massey. Retrieved from <https://john-laurens.tumblr.com/post/158037536498/my-dear-kinloch-i-have-just-been-perusing-your>, Accessed 29 April 2021; Francis Kinloch to John Laurens, 28 April 1776, Retrieved from <https://archive.org/details/letterfirst4page00laur>, Accessed 29 April 2021.

intimate relationship while they lived at the house, as their effusive exchanges crossed beyond even the language of intimate friendship. Muller wrote to Bonstetten on August 8<sup>th</sup>, 1776,

Tell me why I love you more as time passes. You are now incessantly in me and around me. My dearest friend, how much better it is to think of you than to live with the others! How is it possible to desecrate a heart that is consecrated to you? I need you more than ever; over and above these immutable, laudable plans for a useful life and an immortal name I have forsworn everything that is considered to be pleasant and delightful – not only pleasure but love, not only revels, but good living, not only greed, but ambition. B. [Bonstetten] is everything to me, you make all my battles easy and all abstinence sweet. Thus you live in my mind and especially in my heart.<sup>26</sup>

Their relationship appeared to continue for decades. On May 20<sup>th</sup>, 1802, Bonstetten wrote to Muller,

Ah! Mully, Allow me still to call you by that sweet name. I wish to see you, I sigh for your friendship. Is it still alive, do you wish to keep our long-standing vow? Ah! you and my love are my consolation, my life. Do you still love me? Oh! what would I not give to embrace you! ... I read your letters with a transport which I cannot describe to you. All my youth appears before my eyes, but with the bitter sentiment of my eternal uncertainty. I realise too late, alas, the route that I ought to have taken, the road along which your eloquence wished to lead me.<sup>27</sup>

Muller was also subject to a smear campaign intending to label him a homosexual.

One of [Müller's] former pupils (and perhaps lovers) invented a Hungarian Count Louis von Batthyani and penned letters to Müller in which the Count expressed his love and inclination. Müller responded with letters of unfettered passion and an awareness that this friendship and its depiction in letters far exceeded his earlier relationship with Bonstetten, possibly the purest expression of eighteenth-century homosocial desire that exists. After a year and more than a hundred letters, when the fiction could no longer be sustained, Müller was financially and psychologically destroyed.

---

<sup>26</sup> Muller to Bonstetten, August 8, 1776, Retrieved from <https://john-laurens.tumblr.com/post/155747168828/ive-been-doing-a-bit-of-research-on-francis>, Accessed 02 May 2022.

<sup>27</sup> Bonstetten to Muller, 20 May 1802, Retrieved from *ibid*, Accessed 02 May 2022.

Kinloch surrounded himself with men who relied on their homosocial (and likely homoerotic) attachments. While his direct romantic connections with these men were not as outright as Muller and Bonstetter's exchanges, he was often referred to as "Muller's Kinloch" in Bonstetter's letters, and also called "my Beloved" by Vegobre. Therefore, it is not a stretch to propose that if Kinloch was not homoerotically involved himself, he was quite familiar with same-sex attachment. By those measures, the potential for Laurens and Kinloch to have entertained a homoerotic attachment was not out of the realm of possibilities.<sup>28</sup>

Some historians believe that the heroic friendship should remain firmly situated in platonic love. David Halperin's book *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* surveys numerous elements of human sexuality that explains the path to the modern constructions of homosexuality. In his chapter on the history of male homosexuality, Halperin discusses the four dynamics he attributes to Western constructions of male-male sexuality. His four categories are: Effeminacy, Pederasty/ "Active Sodomy," Friendship/Love, and Homosexuality. For the purposes of this analysis, his category of Friendship/Love proves most useful, especially considering its specific location in the eighteenth century. The crux of Halperin's argument lies in the idea that romantic/heroic friendships were strictly sexless and platonic, but still integral to the eventual formation of homosexuality. Through their deep, intimate expressions of male love, heroic friendships represented some of the first realizations of what could later be considered homosexual love.

Halperin equivocates sexual love in the eighteenth century with power dynamics, relying on the superiority/inferiority complex that was essential to the common understanding of

---

<sup>28</sup> *The Gay & Lesbian Literary Heritage* (1995), ed. Claude J. Summers, Retrieved from ibid, Accessed 29 April 2021.

sodomitical behavior at the time (an imbalance in age, status, wealth, etc.). Thus, as the heroic friendship was based in equality between two men in almost every element of life, the heroic friendship was separate from sexual love. Halperin explains, “It is this very emphasis on identity, similarity, and mutuality that distances the friendship tradition, in its original social and discursive context, from the world of sexual love.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, Halperin asserts that the heroic friendship of the eighteenth century would have been innately sexless, as sex was seen solely as an expression of power imbalance in a relationship, and men of equal standing would not want to subordinate one or the other through sexual acts if they truly loved one another. Halperin does, however, emphasize the importance of what Lyons has called “heroic friendship” in his discussion of male homosexuality: “...the friendship tradition provided socially empowered men with an established discursive venue in which to express, without social reproach, sentiments of passionate and mutual love for one another... and such passionate, mutual love between persons of the same sex is an important component of what we now call homosexuality.”<sup>30</sup> According to Halperin, the history of “male love,” which embodies only close platonic friendship, is just as essential to the construction of homosexuality as romantic and sexual love. Thus, heroic friendships are the perfect model of this sexless male love, love that should be considered in the study of homosexuality, but still considered platonic when situated in the eighteenth century.

Halperin’s theory is not uncommon – many scholars deem heroic friendships as innately sexless, and do not consider the love of heroic friends as intrinsically “romantic” or even foundational to the later constructions of homosexuality. However, to explicitly separate sex and love raises questions for the same-sex relationships as manifested in the eighteenth century. If

---

<sup>29</sup> Halperin, David M., *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (United Kingdom: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 121.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

sex was only a gender-based power dynamic in which the individual taking the submissive role was innately feminized and therefore subordinated, did sex in the eighteenth century ever align itself with love? In heterosexual relationships, was sex an expression of power, of love, or both? In other words, could sex be separated from power in a heterosexual relationship? If heterosexual sex was never separated from power in the eighteenth century, then it could be assumed that same-sex intimacy reflected the same dynamics. But did male love have to be sexless to maintain equality amongst participants? Such questions require further research, but Halperin's foundational statements still emphasize the importance of male friendship in the construction of homosexuality. There is no doubt that those involved in heroic friendships loved each other. So, does the question then become one of sex? Is sex necessary in studying the development of eighteenth-century same-sex sexuality? Like Halperin, historian Caleb Crain does not seem to think so, but other scholars, including Lyons and Foucault, place more emphasis on sexual action. While it is nearly impossible to determine if two individuals ever interacted sexually without direct confirmation, the concept of male same-sex sexuality in the context of heroic friendships still requires more research into the nuances of love and sex – and whether an analysis of such relationships necessitates a separation or combination of the two.

\*\*\*\*\*

Laurens and Hamilton were young aide-de-camps on General Washington's staff and quickly became close friends. The two men shared interests in politics, literature, economics, and history, and even developed a habit of gifting each other passages from their readings that reminded them of the other person. The model young revolutionaries, full of ardor for the cause and the intelligence to match it, Hamilton and Laurens quickly slid into a near-perfect representation of the "heroic friendship." But were they purely platonic representations of male

love? Or did their friendship allow for further romantic and/or sexual expression, as Lyons posits? While no definitive answer can be reached using the sources available, a number of factors demand a deeper engagement with Lyons's theory of a romantically based heroic friendship. Using the correspondence and life experiences of Laurens and Hamilton, a case can be made that their relationship was a prime example of a heroic friendship that breached the Halperin's platonic boundaries.

In order to contextualize Hamilton and Laurens's relationship in the cultural climate of the mid-to-late eighteenth century, it is important to understand the value of civic contribution and social status to the early nation. Archivist and historian William Benemann emphasizes that those in the upper class may have been able to engage in same-sex intimacy without intense suspicion due to their higher socioeconomic status. He writes, "Almost by definition, it was impossible to be 'gay' in the early years of the eighteenth century without having substantial monetary resources (or without living beyond one's means)."<sup>31</sup> But as the eighteenth century continued, monetary value became less important, and one's place in the community too precedence Benemann uses the life of Baron von Steuben to illustrate this transition. While Von Steuben was not involved in a heroic friendship (thanks to the age difference between himself and his companions), his life in the new nation provides insight into how the culture of eighteenth-century America valued civic duty to the point in which it was willing to look past the "private sexual deviancy" of those who exercised such virtue

During Von Steuben's time assisting the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War, he developed a deep emotional attachments to two men – William North and Benjamin

---

<sup>31</sup> William Benemann, *Male-Male Intimacy in Early America: Beyond Romantic Friendships* (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2006), 55.

Walker, the latter being his aide-de-camp and interpreter. His relationship with Walker and North appeared to be intimate, consensual, and potentially sexual, according to Benemann. In fact, upon his death, Von Steuben legally adopted both Walker and North so that he could leave them his estate, wealth, and belongings, a practice that was not unusual in early intimate same-sex relationships.<sup>32</sup> Von Steuben's relationship with Walker and North emphasizes how the sexual lives of men were often shielded from public scrutiny because they played important roles in the war effort and contributed to building the republic in the war's wake.

Benemann is careful to avoid labeling individuals as "homosexual," following the scholarly understanding that the homosexuality as a pathologized identity category did not occur until the late nineteenth century. However, he does suggest that some people did recognize their own repeated desires for someone of the same sex. Benemann's argument is essential for positioning Hamilton and Laurens in their appropriate contexts. Both men, though originating from different social worlds, were of great value to the Revolution and the new nation's civic agenda. Both men were wealthy, powerful, and influential. By nature of their lot in life, they were afforded more safety to enter into an intimate heroic friendship than others. As evidenced by the life of Baron von Steuben, while apparent "sexual deviancy" was scandalous, it was not enough to distance a person if they served larger and more important cause of the nation. Hamilton and Laurens easily fell into this category. As long as they exercised a significant amount of discretion, any noticeable elements of a relationship that exceeded platonic boundaries was unlikely to rouse intense suspicion.

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 94-113.

Language was significantly more flowery and expressive than present-day communications, especially between men. However, there is reason to believe that much of the correspondence between Hamilton and Laurens exceeded even the most emotionally charged language of the time. Hamilton was ever the effusive writer. To friends and loved ones, he had no shortage of words to express his affection for Laurens. He begins his April 1779 letter to Laurens – easily the most important letter for examining their relationship – with a particularly dramatic *spiel* about his love for him, even noting his apparent distaste for most of humanity, John Laurens excepted. Hamilton playfully teases Laurens, “You sh(ould) not have taken advantage of my sensibility to ste(al) 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....”<sup>33</sup> Despite the air of indulgent warmth in his writing, his ardor alone is not cause to believe that any relationship existed beyond platonic sentiments. As mentioned previously, Hamilton was particularly unrestrained with his emotions, and though his most fervent writings were reserved for the likes of John and Eliza Schuyler Hamilton, passionate written expressions of male love were not uncommon in the eighteenth century.

Yes, despite such commonalities, Hamilton does appear to move beyond platonic boundaries in his letter-writing. While seemingly insignificant, the use of the term of endearment “My Dear” offers a wealth of insight into Hamilton’s perception of his relationship with Laurens. As famously mentioned in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s smash-hit musical adaptation, *Hamilton*, the term “my dear” is embedded with meaning. In Miranda’s song “Take a Break,” Angelica

---

<sup>33</sup> Alexander Hamilton to John Laurens, April 1779, *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed May 02, 2022, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-0100>. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2, 1779–1781, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961, pp. 34–38.].

(Schuyler) Church, Hamilton's sister-in-law, sings about how the simple placement of a comma has changed the intention of the endearment: "In a letter I received from you two weeks ago, I noticed a comma in the middle of a phrase... It changed the meaning; did you intend this... One stroke and you've consumed my waking days, it says: My dearest Angelica... With a comma after dearest, you've written: My dearest, Angelica..."<sup>34</sup> The shift that Angelica mentions is the changing of "dear" from an adjective to a noun, suggesting a romantic connotation instead of platonic, brotherly affection. When used as an adjective noting fondness in an address ("my Dear Laurens"), the use of "dear" follows a typical eighteenth-century greeting. However, the use of "dear" as a noun ("My Dear") proves to insinuate a romantic turn to the phrase.

While Miranda's creative interpretation accessibly explains the circumstance to his audience, it was actually Hamilton who noticed that Angelica had changed the placement of a comma in a letter written to him. She had written on October 2, 1787, "Indeed my dear, Sir if my path was strewed with as many roses, as you have filled your letter with compliments, I should not now lament my absence from America: but even Hope is weary of doing any thing for so assiduous a votary as myself."<sup>35</sup> Her placement of the comma after "my dear" changes the word into a noun, which Hamilton recognized in turn. He wrote back to her on December 6, 1787, teasing, "You ladies despise the pedantry of punctuation. There was a most critical *comma* in your last letter. It is my interest that it should have been designed; but I presume it was accidental. Unriddle this if you can. The proof that you do it rightly may be given by the

---

<sup>34</sup> Original Broadway Cast of *Hamilton*, "Take a Break," track 3.2 on *Hamilton (Original Broadway Cast Recording)*, Hamilton Uptown LLC, 2015, digital download.

<sup>35</sup> Angelica Church to Alexander Hamilton, October 2, 1787, *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed May 02, 2022, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-04-02-0144>. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 4, *January 1787–May 1788*, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1962, pp. 279–280.].

omission or repetition of the same mistake in your next.”<sup>36</sup> Hamilton noticing even the slight change in the nuances of “my dear” further solidifies the intentionality behind every use of that term of endearment. Writing “my dear” or “dearest” as an adjective indicates a general fondness commonly found in both platonic and romantic exchanges in the eighteenth century. It expresses a congeniality that can be used in professional and intimate contexts, and Hamilton uses the adjective form of “my dear” in almost all of his writings and correspondences.<sup>37</sup> In most of his letters to Laurens, he uses the phrase “my dear” as an adjective, often writing it as “my dear Laurens” or “my dear friend” However, there are a few instances where he changes the phrase. At the beginning of the fifth paragraph of the April 1779 letter, Hamilton writes, “And now my Dear,” using the word as a noun. While this instance is the only one of its kind in this letter, Hamilton repeats his usage of “my dear” as a noun in other letters to Laurens, otherwise only using it in that manner in his letters to Eliza. In using “my Dear” as a stand-alone noun phrase, Hamilton is noting intimate affection removed from platonic meaning. The phrase becomes a term of endearment that indicates that the receiver of such words is his most dear one, implying not simply a friendly greeting, but a specific figure of Hamilton’s affection. Such a difference is why Hamilton reacted so coyly to Angelica Church’s presumed grammatical error, as her misplaced comma quickly changed what was likely supposed to be a platonic salutation of “my dear Sir,” into a suggestive address of “my dear, Sir.” Again, as evidenced by Hamilton’s commentary in his letter to his sister-in-law, the placement of the comma was essential to two mutually understood, vastly different definitions of the phrase “my dear.” By these standards,

---

<sup>36</sup> Alexander Hamilton to Angelica Church, December 6, 1787, *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed May 02, 2022, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-04-02-0172>. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 4, *January 1787–May 1788*, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1962, pp. 374–376.].

<sup>37</sup> For example, “my dear sir,” in *The Farmer Refuted*; “my dear Marquis” in letters to the Marquis de Lafayette; “my dear Baron” in letters to Baron von Steuben; and more.

Hamilton's specific and targeted use of "My Dear" as a noun phrase adds a unique consideration to the nature of his and John Laurens's relationship.

But the most revealing aspect of this letter begins three paragraphs later. It is important to note that alongside Hamilton's letter to Laurens, he also encloses a letter intended for John, one that did not make it to him before he left Headquarters. Here, Hamilton describes the letters that were to be passed along to Laurens: "I anticipate by sympathy the pleasure you must feel from the sweet converse of your dearer self in the inclosed letters. I hope they may be recent. They were brought out of New York by General Thompson delivered to him there by a Mrs. Moore not long from England, *soi-disante parente de Madame votre épouse*. She speaks of a daughter of yours, well when she left England, perhaps (---)." <sup>38</sup> As Hamilton notes, the letters were from "a so-called relative of your [Laurens's] wife," and "...speak[s] of a daughter of yours." Although it is impossible to confirm if Hamilton knew about Laurens's wife and daughter before passing along these letters, his tone indicates that may have been in the dark about John's daughter. While this may appear to be a passing statement, Hamilton's brief note sets the tone for the rest of the letter.

Hamilton continues to a section of incessant teasing – he entreats John, "And Now my Dear as we are upon the subject of wife, I empower and command you to get me one in Carolina."<sup>39</sup> He then writes at length about the qualities his wife must encompass, from physical beauty to fortune, to religion. Situating Hamilton and Laurens's relationship in the context of a heroic friendship, his intention behind this paragraph is twofold. On one hand, Hamilton is

---

<sup>38</sup> Alexander Hamilton to John Laurens, April 1779, *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed May 02, 2022, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-0100>. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2, 1779–1781, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961, pp. 34–38.].

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

joking with Laurens about needing to find a wife; essential to the idea of the heroic friendship is balance – a single man and an unmarried man offset the equality embedded in such a relationship. Heroic friendships were fostered in young, unmarried men, and then continued if both were married. If one party remained unmarried, it disrupted the social expectations that were crucial to the discreet nature of the relationship. While two close unmarried men would not raise any concern, as would not the relationship of two close married men, the intimate relationship of a married and unmarried man would become suspicious to outsiders. Again, balance was essential to the maintenance of a heroic friendship, which Hamilton innately understood. Thus, while he is joking with John, if this was, in fact, the first time he had learned about Laurens’s wife and daughter, he is also making a statement rooted in concern – he is bringing the sudden imbalance of their relationship to John’s attention, and therefore urging him to find him a wife in order to restore equilibrium.

On the other hand, Hamilton is also potentially playing on a classic literary technique often appearing in the correspondence of intimate same-sex relationships. In his article “Leander, Lorenzo, and Castalio: An Early American Romance,” Caleb Crain follows the intimate friendship of John Fishbourne Mifflin (nicknamed Leander) and James Gibson (nicknamed Lorenzo) as a window into eighteenth-century effusive communication between men. Crain emphasizes the use of literary “cognomens,” the characters that Mifflin and Gibson used in writing to one another, describing how the literary device allowed for them to express their love for one another through the language of the Age of Sensibility.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> Caleb Crain. “Leander, Lorenzo, and Castalio: An Early American Romance.” *Early American Literature* 33, no. 1 (1998): 217-218. Found in *Long Before Stonewall: Histories of Same-Sex Sexuality in Early America* (United States: NYU Press, 2007).

Crain first discusses the literary game that Mifflin and Gibson engage in throughout their correspondence. He notes that the cognomens represented "... 'fixed personae' that helped to define a space of cultural play. They 'aestheticized conversation by distancing it from the mundane talk of familiars.'" <sup>41</sup> By using aliases, Mifflin and Gibson expressed both their friendship and their literary knowledge, cementing themselves in a cultured group of well-educated individuals. Crain notes the potential for misapplication in reading the emotional letters and journals of male friends in the eighteenth-century, arguing that when men entered into these heroic friendships, they were "...striking a pose: the passionate young hero of the republic." <sup>42</sup>

What makes the heroic friendship unique, in both comparison to the other three accepted categories of same-sex sexuality and in light of the American sociopolitical climate, is that the young republic provides the very basis of the heroic friendship. Its meaning is evidenced in its name – "heroic" friendships were modeled after the young male heroes of Antiquity, spaces in which two young, nobly-minded men could share in intellectual interests as they strive together to serve the republic. Unlike most of the world of eighteenth-century sexuality, heroic friendships were situated in the public sphere, as both parties typically were engaged in politics, the economy, or even the war effort. Hamilton and Laurens understood their positions as young revolutionaries and quasi-politicians, and such roles united them in their heroic friendship. In his last letter to Laurens months after the British surrender at Yorktown, Hamilton pleads for his friend to transition their friendship from the battlefield to politics, writing, "Quit your sword my friend, put on the toga, come to Congress. We know each others sentiments, our views are the same: we have fought side by side to make America free, let us hand in hand struggle to make

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 222.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 230.

her happy.”<sup>43</sup> Tragically, it is unclear if Hamilton’s letter reached Laurens before he was killed in a skirmish less than two weeks later. However, Hamilton’s message still demonstrates his attempts to transition their friendship alongside the country’s changes, but still solidly situate it within the public sphere. As Benemann noted previously, the value to the country held by many of the young men in heroic friendships allowed for increased discretion in their private actions – in essence, they could hide in plain sight, as their emotional and intellectual intimacy was not only on display, but even considered an asset to the republic.

In a common demonstration of calling upon the heroes of Antiquity, Hamilton and Laurens were no strangers to embodying aliases in their writing to one another. In a letter to Hamilton on July 14, 1779, Laurens writes, “Oh that I were a Demosthenes—the Athenians never deserved more bitter exprobration than my Countrymen.”<sup>44</sup> Frustrated with the lack of support he received for his plan to raise an all-Black regiment to fight in the war, he expressed to Hamilton his desire to be a better orator in order to convince his fellow statesmen, just as Demosthenes had done in Ancient Greece. Hamilton later responds to his anger, writing, “Even the animated and persuasive eloquence of my young Demosthenes will not be able to rouse his countrymen from the lethargy of voluptuous indolence, or dissolve the fascinating character of self interest, to inspire them with the wisdom of legislators and with the natural

---

<sup>43</sup> “From Alexander Hamilton to Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens, [15 August 1782],” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-03-02-0058>. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 3, 1782–1786, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1962, pp. 144–146.].

<sup>44</sup> “To Alexander Hamilton from Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens, 14 July 1779,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-0321>. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2, 1779–1781, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961, pp. 102–104.].

enthusiasm of republicans!”<sup>45</sup> Here, Hamilton consoles Laurens, his “young Demosthenes” and sympathizes with his displeasure, using these cognomens in friendly discourse.

In light of Crain’s analysis, it could be theorized that Hamilton was engaging in a watered-down play of cognomens in his April 1779 letter to Laurens. While Hamilton did not directly pose himself and Laurens in this letter as characters with assigned aliases, he echoes the technique in describing his ideal wife. Incidentally, despite his assurances that a wife matching his description will be incredibly hard to find, Hamilton describes a woman who directly aligns with characteristics that John also embodies. To name a few specific examples, one of Hamilton’s requirements is for his wife to be “...well bred (but she must have an aversion to the word *ton*).”<sup>46</sup> Although Hamilton’s desire for a wife of high status is not unusual, especially considering his longing to raise his social status, his use of the word “ton” connotes a deeper meaning. “*Ton*” is the abbreviated form of “*le bon ton*,” or the upper class. In essence, his wife would, despite being a part of the upper class herself, “have an aversion to” the higher social strata. John Laurens, despite being part of the upper class, notoriously disliked the wealthy. Lauren’s biography NAME Massey describes Laurens’s desire for a more balanced distribution of wealth by noting a letter that John sent to his father on February 24, 1778 after receiving word that over 300 homes had been destroyed in a fire in Charleston. John writes, “I deplore the misfortune of Charles Town if it has fallen upon Individuals of moderate fortune; if it affects

---

<sup>45</sup> “From Alexander Hamilton to Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens, [11 September 1779],” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-0446>. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2, 1779–1781, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961, pp. 165–169.].

<sup>46</sup> “From Alexander Hamilton to Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens, [April 1779],” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-0100>. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2, 1779–1781, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961, pp. 34–38.].

only a number of rich men & will contribute to equalizing estates I shall not regret it.”<sup>47</sup>

Additionally, Hamilton continues to recommend that his wife have a significant fortune, and more specifically, “...bring at least a sufficiency to administer to her own extravagancies.”<sup>48</sup> As mentioned previously, Laurens hailed from one of the wealthiest families in the American colonies, and despite his hatred of the upper class, he was not without his own extravagancies. Massey notes that Laurens wrote of his father while at Valley Forge, explaining that he “...required the best clothes and accessories, so, as he put it, ‘I may not disgrace the relation in which I stand to the President of Congress, and the Commander in Chief of the Armies of the United States, by an unworthy appearance.’”<sup>49</sup> While Hamilton’s teasing is apparent in this passage, his complete intention cannot be determined exactly. Whether or not Hamilton was intending to describe John in his description of a wife, he was still referencing the balance necessary to a heroic friendship in a joking fashion.

In Hamilton’s penultimate paragraph, he imbibes his teasing with blatant innuendo. He continues to playfully tease Laurens about finding him a wife, writing, “If you should not readily meet with a lady that you think answers my description you can only advertise in the public papers and doub[t]less you will hear of many competitors for most of the qualifications required, who will be glad to become candidates for such a prize as I am.”<sup>50</sup> He follows his flagrant

---

<sup>47</sup> Gregory Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), 101.

<sup>48</sup> “From Alexander Hamilton to Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens, [April 1779],” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-0100>. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2, 1779–1781, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961, pp. 34–38.].

<sup>49</sup> Gregory Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), 88.

<sup>50</sup> “From Alexander Hamilton to Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens, [April 1779],” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-0100>. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2, 1779–1781, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961, pp. 34–38.].

jocularity with two sentences rife with innuendo, saying, “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 (— — — —).”<sup>51</sup> Referencing John’s significant artistic ability, Hamilton asks him to draw his portrait for any woman worthy of being his wife, paying special attention to his physique. He further expounds on this point by utilizing a popular Shakespearean innuendo referencing the “length of my nose,” suggesting that John take care in drawing his genitalia. Here, Hamilton borders on the “*fortiori sexual*” Crain discusses in his interpretation of Mifflin and Gibson’s relationship.<sup>52</sup> While innuendo is not uncommon in letters between male friends, Hamilton’s letters have a uniquely personal bent in reference to Laurens’s role in the suggestion. Even more interestingly, the final phrase of the paragraph – five words, specifically – have been made illegible with excessive markings. Most scholars agree that the redaction was done by Alexander Hamilton’s son, John Church Hamilton, who reviewed and compiled all his father’s personal correspondence years after his death. John C. Hamilton not only rendered this phrase unreadable, but he also wrote “I must not publish the whole of this” at the top of the manuscript, in turn only publishing the first three paragraphs of the seven-paragraph letter. The entire letter was not published until 1904, where the complete manuscript can be found in Henry Cabot Lodge’s biography of Alexander Hamilton, *The Works of Alexander Hamilton* (though he misdates this letter as December 1779).<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Caleb Crain, “Leander, Lorenzo, and Castalio: An Early American Romance.” *Early American Literature* 33, no. 1 (1998): 217-218. Found in *Long Before Stonewall: Histories of Same-Sex Sexuality in Early America* (United States: NYU Press, 2007).

<sup>53</sup> Alexander Hamilton, *The Works of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Henry Cabot Lodge (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1904), 184-188. See Appendix A for full April 1779 letter from Hamilton to Laurens.

Hamilton's April 1779 letter to Laurens is not the only instance of John C. Hamilton's heavy-handed edits. Work on the letters conducted at the Library of Congress shows that he also censored sexually charged sections of letters between his own parents.<sup>54</sup> In the case of obscuring his father's messages to his mother, it can be assumed that he was embarrassed at the words his father wrote, considering that he was directing them towards his mother. As a mortified son, he crossed out the more revealing aspects of the letter. Did you do the same selective editing to Hamilton's April 1779 letter to Laurens?? Why would John Hamilton cross out a phrase and explicitly note his plan not to publish the latter half of the letter if not for his own embarrassment and concern for the image of both his father and John Laurens? Not only was J.C. Hamilton in the position of the embarrassed child, but he was also concerned with the reputation and legacy of John Laurens, a person he clearly admired. In his biographies of his father, John Church always spoke highly of Laurens, writing praise such as "[Laurens] added grace to every circle in which he moved, and interest to every subject on which he spoke."<sup>55</sup> Additionally, it is likely that J.C. Hamilton was Laurens's namesake – while "John Church" was clearly named in honor of Angelica Schuyler's husband, Hamilton's brother-in-law, John Church could also have easily encompassed John Laurens in the overall reference. Such a theory is further corroborated by the naming of John Church Hamilton's son – Laurens Hamilton. It is obvious that John Laurens was a figure of admiration to a young John Church, and he likely would have wanted to include him in his overall protection and concern regarding the contents of the April 1779 letter.

---

<sup>54</sup> Wendi Maloney, "Technology at the Library: Long-Hidden Text Is Uncovered in Alexander Hamilton Letter," Library of Congress Blog, Library Congress, January 11, 2018, accessed May 02, 2022, <https://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2018/01/technology-at-the-library-long-hidden-text-is-uncovered-in-alexander-hamilton-letter/>.

<sup>55</sup> John Church Hamilton, *The Life of Alexander Hamilton* (Boston: D. Appleton, 1840), 231.

Interestingly, the practice of naming one's children after a male lover was common amongst men involved in heroic friendships during the eighteenth century. Just as naming a child after a family member or close friend was a way to demonstrate love, respect, and honor for that person, men who were either once romantically involved with another man or those who were continuing a relationship while being married often named their children after their lovers to honor them. Benemann explains a similar situation between two men, William Wirt and Dabney Carr, both of whom were romantically involved, though eventually both married to women.

Benemann remarks:

William Wirt and Dabney Carr entered into a type of surrogate parenthood: Carr named one of his sons William, and Wirt in turn named one of his sons Dabney. Wirt writes in very specific terms of his desire to use the ritual naming of their sons as a method of propagating their relationship, of extending it into the future through the lives of the next generation. For Wirt the reciprocal exchange of names was an intentional simulation of a married couple's ability to incarnate their love through the creation of children, and to project that love into the future through the lives of succeeding generations. "Our children will learn to know and love each other as their fathers have done before them." William Wirt and Dabney Carr would in a sense become William Carr and Dabney Wirt in a type of double-helix intertwining of identities.<sup>56</sup>

Although Hamilton and Laurens's naming choices could be borne of platonic admiration, Benemann's theory is worth considering. By these standards, it is also important to notice the name of John Laurens's daughter – Frances Eleanor Laurens. John wasn't present for Frances's birth, but he clearly assisted in deciding his daughter's name, as her middle name pays homage to his late mother. Her first name, while certainly a popular female name at the time, is the feminine version of "Francis," coincidentally the name of Laurens's former friend and half of his first recorded heroic friendship, Francis Kinloch. Regardless of namesake, John Church

---

<sup>56</sup> William Benemann, *Male-Male Intimacy in Early America: Beyond Romantic Friendships* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2006), 19.

Hamilton's censorship raises more questions than answers, but certainly makes a case for the letter's nuanced meanings.

Hamilton concludes his letter by cementing that his writing has all been in good fun. He confirms that he does not actually want a wife, and that he was simply joking about the idea. Hamilton explains, "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 folie* [silly game]. 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."<sup>57</sup> Hamilton's quick dismissal of his effort to find a wife further demonstrates how his ramblings were more for the benefit of teasing John about the sudden imbalance in their relationship after he learned of John's marital status. Hamilton continues, "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."<sup>58</sup> Here he self-reflects, noting that his letter, albeit meant to be joking in nature, may have missed its mark. He has, however, succeeded in teasing, but also "gratified his feelings." Again, Hamilton cements that his letter had more than just a frivolous, playful purpose – instead, he has also explained and satisfied his feelings on the matter his relationship with John and the imbalance that has occurred. His final statements aptly summarize how this letter offers the clearest look into the calculated relationship of the heroic friendship while also providing clues that suggest that the nature of the relationship may not have simply been platonic.

---

<sup>57</sup> "From Alexander Hamilton to Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens, [April 1779]," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-0100>. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2, 1779–1781, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961, pp. 34–38.].

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

Between Hamilton and Laurens, Hamilton was the more prolific writer and correspondent. John's letters were notably shorter in length, less expressive, and lesser in overall number – although, Hamilton mentions numerous letters of Laurens that have since been lost to time. Additionally, much of their time during the war was spent together as aide-de-camps to General Washington, so the correspondence available today only spans the brief periods in which they were apart. When they were separated, Hamilton wrote Laurens rather excessively, even commenting on his lack of communication:

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.<sup>59</sup>

Thus, the overall picture of their relationship is derived from a rather one-sided perspective.

However, it is important to consider the lapses in their communication as well – while John was a sporadic responder, the letters to which he appears to not respond also give insight into the nature of their relationship.

Again, as Hamilton expressed in the April 1779 letter, balance in marital status was also essential to the maintenance of the heroic friendship. When Hamilton discovered that Laurens was married, his jokes had an air of concern and annoyance. In order to restore the balance in their relationship, Hamilton must uphold his side of the agreement and find a wife – which he finds in Eliza Schuyler, just months later in early 1780. Their meeting was actually the

---

<sup>59</sup> “From Alexander Hamilton to Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens, [11 September 1779],” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-0446>. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2, 1779–1781, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961, pp. 165–169.].

coincidental result of Washington denying Hamilton's pleas to join Laurens in the Southern campaign of the war, a decision with which he was exceedingly unhappy:

I have strongly solicited leave to go to the Southward. It could not be refused; but arguments have been used to dissuade me from it, which however little weight they may have had in my judgment gave law to my feelings. I am chagrined and unhappy but I submit. In short Laurens I am disgusted with every thing in this world but yourself and very few more honest fellows and I have no other wish than as soon as possible to make a brilliant exit. 'Tis a weakness; but I feel I am not fit for this terrestreal Country.<sup>60</sup>

Very soon after their first meeting, in early April of 1780, Alexander and Eliza were engaged.

Interestingly, as Chernow notes, "Hamilton neglected to mention either Schuyler or his abrupt decision to marry her..." in his March 30th letter to John Laurens.<sup>61</sup> As Chernow describes, Hamilton's omission was a "curious lack of candor" in comparison to how intimately he shared with John prior to his engagement.<sup>62</sup> In fact, Hamilton ends his letter with an intimately sentimental few phrases, saying, "Adieu my Dear; I am sure you will exert yourself to save your country; but do not unnecessarily risk one of its most valuable sons. Take as much care of yourself as you ought for the public sake and for the sake of Yr. affectionate A. Hamilton."<sup>63</sup> Again, Hamilton addresses Laurens with the overtly affectionate "My Dear," reminding Laurens to stay safe – if not for the public, then for him. Much like Laurens had omitted his marital status just a half year prior, Hamilton neglects to inform Laurens of his engagement. Why he does so is not entirely uncertain, as evidenced by the next few letters exchanged between the two men.

---

<sup>60</sup> "From Alexander Hamilton to Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens, 8 January [1780]," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-0568>. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2, 1779–1781, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961, pp. 254–255.].

<sup>61</sup> Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 132.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> "From Alexander Hamilton to Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens, [30 March 1780]," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-0634>. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2, 1779–1781, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961, pp. 303–304.].

While Hamilton's marriage would equate a restored balance to his and Laurens's romantic friendship on paper, it is likely that Laurens, who had married only out of pity and duty, did not socially consider himself to be married. His marriage did not occupy a significant portion of his mind or identity. Hamilton, however, was clearly and truly in love with Eliza, their shockingly quick courtship (even by eighteenth century standards) aside. Hamilton may have been concerned that John would realize that his marriage was not born out of duty, and therefore might become upset at the notion of his engagement. Platonic or romantic notions aside, Hamilton was Laurens's first personal priority, and Hamilton's engagement meant that Laurens would likely not be his any longer. In that sense, the equality in their relationship was thrown out of balance relationally, despite being restored in technicality.

Eventually, Alexander does inform John of his engagement. While Hamilton had no shortage of ravings to describe his bride-to-be to other people, his long-overdue message to Laurens exudes attempted – and failed – nonchalance and dismissal. On June 30, almost three months after his engagement, Hamilton writes to John,

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 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.<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> "From Alexander Hamilton to Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens, [30 June 1780]," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-0742>. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2, 1779–1781, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961, pp. 347–349.].

His message is situated at the end of his letter, offering no more than a few sentences to inform John of his engagement before he signs off with one of his more formal addresses to John – a simple “Adieu God bless you. A Hamilton.”<sup>65</sup>

While there are a few lost letters sent between June 30 and their next correspondence (one attributed to each man), Hamilton does not revisit any conversation about Eliza until a letter dated September 16, 1780. While he wrote admittedly infrequently to Laurens since June 30, most of his writings consisted of updates on the war effort (as Laurens was held as a prisoner of war in Pennsylvania for most of 1780) and outbursts of emotion regarding such topics.<sup>66</sup>

Unfortunately, Laurens’s response – if he had any – to Hamilton’s engagement has since been lost. However, Hamilton’s September 16<sup>th</sup> letter indicates that he likely had words about the subject, as Hamilton reassures him of their relationship’s strength in light of his impending marriage. He writes,

In spite of Schuylers 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 françoise*.<sup>67</sup>

Riddled with Hamilton’s usual Laurens-directed affection, the letter begins with an audacious statement: Alexander had previously noted the beauty of Eliza’s black eyes but sets such value

---

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Hamilton writes in a letter dated September 12, 1780, that “The truth is I am an unlucky honest man, that speak my sentiments to all and with emphasis. I say this to you because you know it and will not charge me with vanity. I hate Congress—I hate the army—I hate the world—I hate myself. The whole is a mass of fools and knaves; I could almost except you and Meade. Adieu. A Hamilton. My ravings are for your own bosom.”

<sup>67</sup> “From Alexander Hamilton to Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens, [16 September 1780],” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-0860>. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2, 1779–1781, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961, pp. 431–432.].

and feelings aside to reassure John that there is not only a part of himself set apart from the public, but also from Betsey herself, that is, in turn, wholly devoted to him. He then follows with the most important part of the letter when considering both Hamilton's intentions with this paragraph and Laurens's now-unknown response to Hamilton's engagement. When reading the word "impatience" with a twenty-first century understanding of the definition, readers assume that Hamilton is using it in the sense of an urgency or excitement towards him getting married. However, in Samuel Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language in which the Words are deduced from their Originals, explained in their Different Meanings*, the word "impatience" actually has a different primary definition. In fact, the most common modern definition of the word is listed as its third and final definition. The first two definitions are "Inability to suffer pain; rage under suffering." and "Vehemence of temper; heat of passion."<sup>68</sup> Using specifically the first definition, Laurens' emotions are expressed differently – he is no longer urging Hamilton to get married, instead, he is angry and suffering at the thought of him being married. Thus, Hamilton would be responding to his lamenting by saying that he should not have these feelings of resentment or anger at his impending marriage, because he is still maintaining the part of himself that is only for Laurens – even within the bonds of marriage.

Hamilton then writes, "...a strange cure by the way, as if after matrimony I was to be less devoted than I am now."<sup>69</sup> His use of the word "cure" potentially references the expectations for same-sex sexuality at the time – heterosexual marriage was seen as a "cure" for extended bachelordom, especially in cases involving two intimately involved men that raised suspicion in

---

<sup>68</sup> Samuel Johnson, "Impatience," in *A Dictionary of the English Language in Which the Words Are Deduced from Their Originals, Explained in Their Different Meanings* (London: W. Strahan, 1755).

<sup>69</sup> "From Alexander Hamilton to Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens, [16 September 1780]," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-0860>. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2, 1779–1781, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961, pp. 431–432.].

the community. Additionally, the mid-to-late eighteenth century provided the first medicalized theories of same-sex sexuality, both in cause and in cure.<sup>70</sup> Hamilton understands that since they will soon both be married, their relationship could continue without suspicion, while also making a half-hearted joke about matrimony “curing” his feelings for John.

The next few sentences of Hamilton’s letter are rich with innuendo. Hamilton, as seen previously, marked his more sexual statements with handwritten underlines, translated into type using italics. First, Hamilton assures Laurens that in his marriage (overseen by the god of marriage, Hymen), erotic love and sex will still have a place (as explained by his reference to Cupid, the Greek god of love and sex). He writes, “Let me tell you, that I intend to restore the empire of Hymen and that Cupid is to be his prime Minister.”<sup>71</sup> Hymen and Cupid were often depicted as being at odds with one another, as Cupid could easily destroy Hymen’s intents to uphold marital values and fidelity. While Hamilton is making a statement about the nature of his marriage, he could also be making a statement about his extramarital relations – despite Hymen’s empire being restored with his marriage to Betsey, Cupid is to still remain important in his life, and potentially in his relationship with John. With John still being held as a prisoner of war in Pennsylvania, Hamilton then expresses how he wishes to see John again, and notes that he wants to invite him to his winter wedding in Albany. What is interesting is what he next insinuates:

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 françoise*.<sup>72</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup> William Benemann, *Male-Male Intimacy in Early America: Beyond Romantic Friendships* (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>71</sup> “From Alexander Hamilton to Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens, [16 September 1780],” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-0860>. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2, 1779–1781, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961, pp. 431–432.].

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

Although the exact meaning behind Hamilton's words is not clear, he is obviously making a joke about his upcoming wedding night – the “*final consummation*.” What he means by inviting Laurens to “witness” said event is, ultimately, unclear. However, he mentions that Eliza loves him “*a l'americaine*” not “*a la françoise*,” essentially stating that his wife only loves John platonically, and not in a romantic or sexual manner. Do those statements imply that while Eliza loves Laurens only as a friend, Hamilton does not? Again, nothing about this passage is able to be deciphered in any certainty but should be mentioned nonetheless.

From this letter forward, Hamilton and Laurens's letters to one another become more sporadic, though still relatively consistent, and relatively less affectionate. Hamilton still routinely reassures Laurens of his love in short snippets scattered throughout his correspondence, such as: “Adieu (my) beloved friend. Do justice to my (regard) for you. Assure yourself that (it is) impossible more a[r]dently to wis(h for your) health safety pleasure and success (than) I do. God send you speedily back to us.”<sup>73</sup> There is a significant loss of documentation on John's front, as most of his letters from late 1780 and 1781 have been lost to time. As the war was ending, John and Alexander were kept separately busy with various jobs, including Hamilton's new life as a husband and eventual father. In the final two letters Hamilton and Laurens exchanged, some of the fondness of their younger years seeps back into the messages. In July of 1782, still deeply entrenched in the dwindling Southern campaign of the war, Laurens writes to Hamilton,

I was flattered with an account of your being elected a delegate from N. York, and am much mortified not to hear it confirmed by yourself. I must confess to you, that, at the present state of the War, I shd. prefer your going into Congress, and from thence,

---

<sup>73</sup> “From Alexander Hamilton to Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens, [4 February 1781],” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-1059>. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2, 1779–1781, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961, pp. 549–551.].

becoming a Minister plenipotentiary for peace, to your remaining in the Army, where the dull System of seniority and the Tableau would prevent you from having the important commands to which you are entitled; but at any rate I wd. not have you renounce your rank in the Army, unless you entered the career above-mentioned. Your private affairs cannot require such immediate and close attention; you speak like a *pater familias* surrounded with a numerous progeny.<sup>74</sup>

Clearly, Hamilton had mentioned his career transitions, citing his growing family as part of the reason for the change. While Hamilton's letter has since been lost, John seems to be teasing him about how much he speaks of his wife and children. Whether the words were said with a positive or sarcastic tone is uncertain, but they represent a vast difference between Hamilton and Laurens – Hamilton wholeheartedly threw himself into the role of husband and father, while Laurens fled from it entirely. Nonetheless, Laurens concludes his letter with exceedingly affectionate words in comparison to his usual writing – normally, Hamilton was the more emotive of the two. He writes, “Adieu, my dear friend; while circumstances place so great a distance between us, I entreat you not to withdraw the consolation of your letters. You know the unalterable sentiments of your affectionate Laurens.”<sup>75</sup> Hamilton responds to this letter with equally affectionate expressions, writing, “It requires all the virtue and all the abilities of the Country. Quit your sword my friend, put on the toga, come to Congress. We know each others sentiments, our views are the same: we have fought side by side to make America free, let us hand in hand struggle to make her happy. Yrs for ever, A Hamilton.”<sup>76</sup> It is unlikely that this final letter even reached John before he was killed in a paltry skirmish in South Carolina on August 27, 1782. However,

---

<sup>74</sup> “To Alexander Hamilton from Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens, July 1782,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-03-02-0045>. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 3, 1782–1786, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1962, pp. 121–122.].

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> “From Alexander Hamilton to Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens, [15 August 1782],” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-03-02-0058>. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 3, 1782–1786, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1962, pp. 144–146.].

despite their distance, the two friends remained close in contact and fondness in John's final months.

Because of John's untimely death, Hamilton and Laurens's heroic friendship ended abruptly. There is no record of how Hamilton found out about Laurens's death, as the first reference he made to it in any correspondence was in a letter to General Nathanael Greene in October of 1782.<sup>77</sup> However, scholars almost unanimously maintain that regardless of the nature of Hamilton and Laurens's relationship, Hamilton's heroic friendship with Laurens was one of the most intimate and profound relationships of his life, second only to that of his relationship with Eliza. Had John and Alexander had more time together after the war and into adulthood, who knows how their relationship would have fizzled out or flourished – both patterns can be seen in other heroic friendships of the same period. Unfortunately, ambiguity is the only definitive result of their relationship – there are more potentials than certainties. What can be certain, however, is that, in Ron Chernow's words, "After the death of John Laurens, Hamilton shut off some compartment of his emotions and never reopened it."<sup>78</sup> Yet what is known of their relationship is still worth studying in the context of a classical heroic/romantic friendship of the eighteenth century, especially as a study of Lyons's theory of heroic friendships as a category of same-sex intimacy in America.

While Hamilton would not have another heroic friendship, , one instance in his later life raises questions about his sexuality. Again, sexuality in the eighteenth century was not understood in terms of identity but was still an element of human life and interaction. Thus,

---

<sup>77</sup> "From Alexander Hamilton to Major General Nathanael Greene, [12 October 1782]," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-03-02-0090>. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 3, 1782–1786, ed. Harold C. Syrett. New York: Columbia University Press, 1962, pp. 183–184.].

<sup>78</sup> Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 173.

while a person would not conceive of the modern-day labels present for describing a sexual orientation, they still could experience same-sex attraction on a routine basis. On January 31, 1799, Charles Adams wrote his father, John Adams, a brief letter detailing a dinner conversation between himself, Hamilton, and “Church” (presumably John Church, Hamilton’s brother-in-law, or Philip Church, Hamilton’s nephew). Charles had worked for Hamilton’s law office since after graduation from Harvard in 1789, and he remained friends with him until his death on November 30, 1800.<sup>79</sup> In this letter, Charles mentions a short exchange between Hamilton and Church. He writes,

Nay he [Hamilton] even went so far as to say at his own Table when I was present; that he had, in his own words “*Been that day appointing a Son of the Notorious Bill Livingston’s a Midshipman in our Navy.*” This modest speech was addressed to Church whose reply was you have then I find weaknesses not confined to the female sex: which produced a laugh and perhaps was not thought of by any person but myself afterwards.<sup>80</sup>

In summary, Church implied that Hamilton had appointed a young man as a Midshipman simply because he found him attractive, remarking that Hamilton had weaknesses not only for women, but for men as well. In response, Hamilton merely laughed. Charles appeared to have been taken aback at such a question and response – he noted that he seemed to be the only person who thought anything of such an exchange. For context, a question like the one Church asked Hamilton was not out of left field – the entire letter is essentially Charles discussing how Hamilton’s appointments to the Navy were increasingly offered to young and attractive men. In the previous paragraph, Charles wrote,

---

<sup>79</sup> Fred Kaplan, *John Quincy Adams: American Visionary* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2015), 100.

<sup>80</sup> “Charles Adams to John Adams, 31 January 1799,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-13-02-0196>. [Original source: *The Adams Papers*, Adams Family Correspondence, vol. 13, *May 1798 – September 1799*, ed. Sara Martin, Hobson Woodward, Christopher F. Minty, Amanda A. Mathews, Neal E. Millikan, Emily Ross, Sara B. Sikes, and Sara Georgini. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017, pp. 385–386.].

I should err with respect to my sentiments of what are here called Hamilton's appointments... He has become the Universal Recommender. Many of the appointments made as I have reason to believe at his request are spoken of as extremely improper. I could mention many. Daubeny for instance as first Leutt of the Navy when there is not a single Merchant who would trust him with the Command of a Sloop of Twenty tons.<sup>81</sup>

Evidently, Hamilton appointed Daubeny to the Navy while Charles noted the supposed lack of skill: a sloop was a common sailboat, which makes Charles' argument read that "not even a merchant would trust Daubeny with even the smallest sailboat." Why, then, would he be appointed a first Lieutenant, a rank of decent stature, in the Navy? The answer may lie in the next letter Charles sends to his father. In a letter dated February 19, 1799, Charles references the same Daubeny, saying: "Your hopes with respect to Daubeny are or may be fulfilled. I know him to be well attached to Government but I also know he is an unskilful Sailor. I know he is a Fop and as such regarded by all men of Maritime knowledge."<sup>82</sup> The eighteenth century "fop," as noted above, was a blatantly effeminate man who expressed interest in other men by taking upon the characteristics of a woman and exuding "womanly desires."<sup>83</sup> It appears as if John Church recognized the pattern in Hamilton's appointments, commented on it, and Hamilton's nonchalant response drew Charles's attention. Nonetheless, while Hamilton's days of intimate heroic friendships were long gone, his sexual practices and inclinations still raised questions to people both in the past and present.

Hamilton and Laurens's relationship is one heroic friendship out of a generation of countless others. Thanks to Hamilton's prolific hand and the prominence of Laurens's family, a

---

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> "Charles Adams to John Adams, 19 February 1799," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-13-02-0214>. [Original source: *The Adams Papers*, Adams Family Correspondence, vol. 13, *May 1798 – September 1799*, ed. Sara Martin, Hobson Woodward, Christopher F. Minty, Amanda A. Mathews, Neal E. Millikan, Emily Ross, Sara B. Sikes, and Sara Georgini. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017, pp. 411–412.].

<sup>83</sup> Clare Lyons, "Mapping an Atlantic Sexual Culture: Homoeroticism in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (Jan., 2003).

significant amount of information is available to examine the context of their heroic friendship. While it is impossible to make definitive statements on the nature of their relationship at its most intimate, it is necessary to consider the possibility of Lyons's theory: Laurens and Hamilton were valuable contributors to the birth of a nation and, at the same time, fit the necessary qualifications of a heroic friendship. These roles were mutually reinforcing. Their relationship offers insight into the social life of men in eighteenth-century America and the roots of American same-sex sexuality. Although not every heroic friendship extended past platonic boundaries, it is important to examine those that may have done so, bringing light to the stories that were otherwise kept silent.

## Appendix A: Alexander Hamilton to John Laurens, April 1779

[Middlebrook, New Jersey, April, 1779]

Cold in my professions, warm in ⟨my⟩ friendships, I wish, my Dear Laurens, it m⟨ight⟩ be in my power, by action 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 on the caprice of others. You sh⟨ould⟩ not have taken advantage of my sensibility to ste⟨al⟩ 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 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⟩.

I have received your two letters one from Philadelphia the other from Chester. I am pleased with your success, so far, and I hope the favourable omens, that precede your application to the Assembly may have as favourable an issue, provided the situation of affairs sh⟨ould⟩ require it which I fear will be the case. But both for your country's sake and for my own I wish the enemy may be gone from Georgia before you arrive and that you may be obliged to return and share the fortunes of your old friends. ⟨In respect⟩ to the Commission, which you ⟨received from⟩ Congress, all the world must think your conduct perfectly right. Indeed your ideas upon this occasion seem not to have their wonted accuracy; and you have had scruples, in a great measure, without foundation. By your appointment as Aide De Camp to the Commander in Chief, you had as much the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, as any officer in the line—your receiving a commission as Lieutenant Colonel from the date of that appointment, does not in the least injure or interfere with one of them; unless by virtue of it you are introduced into a particular regiment in violation of the right of succession; which is not the case at present neither is it a necessary consequence. As you were going to command a batalion, it was proper you should have a commission; and if this commission had been dated posterior to your appointment as Aide De Camp, I should have considered it as derogatory to your former rank, to mine, and to that of the whole corps. The only thing I see wrong in the affair is this—Congress by their conduct, both on the former and present occasion, appear to have intended to confer a privilege, an honor, a mark of distinction, a something upon you; which they withhold from other Gentlemen in the family. This carries with it an air of preference, which, though we can all truly say, we love your character, and admire your military merit, cannot fail to give some of us uneasy sensations. But in this, my Dear J I wish you to understand me well. The blame, if there is any, falls wholly upon Congress. I repeat it, your conduct has been perfectly right and even laudable; you rejected the offer when you ought to have rejected it; and you accepted ⟨it⟩ when you ought to have accepted it; and let me ⟨add⟩ with a degree of overscrupulous delicacy. It ⟨was necessary⟩ to your project; your ⟨project⟩ was the public good; and *I* should have done the same. In hesitating, you have refined upon the refinements of generosity.

There is a total stagnation of news here, political and military. Gates has refused the Indian command. Sullivan is come to take it. The former has lately given a fresh proof of his impudence, his folly and his rascality. *'Tis no great matter*; but a peculiarity in the case prevents my saying *what*.

I anticipate by sympathy the pleasure you must feel from the sweet converse of your dearer self in the inclosed letters. I hope they may be recent. They were brought out of New York by General Thompson delivered to him there by a Mrs. Moore not long from England, *soi-disante parente de Madame votre épouse*. She speaks of a daughter of yours, well when she left England, perhaps (---).

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. Take her description—She must be young, handsome (I lay most stress upon a good shape) sensible (a little learning will do), well bred (but she must have an aversion to the word *ton*) chaste and tender (I am an enthusiast in my notions of fidelity and fondness) of some good nature, a great deal of generosity (she must neither love money nor scolding, for I dislike equally a termagent and an œconomist). In politics, I am indifferent what side she may be of; I think I have arguments that will easily convert her to mine. As to religion a moderate stock will satisfy me. She must believe in god and hate a saint. But as to fortune, the larger stock of that the better. You know my temper and circumstances and will therefore pay special attention to this article in the treaty. Though I run no risk of going to Purgatory for my avarice; yet as money is an essential ingredient to happiness in this world—as I have not much of my own and as I am very little calculated to get more either by my address or industry; it must needs be, that my wife, if I get one, bring at least a sufficiency to administer to her own extravagancies. NB You will be pleased to recollect in your negotiations that I have no invincible antipathy to the *maidenly beauties* & that I am willing to take the *trouble* of them upon myself.

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 competitors for most of the qualifications required, 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 (-----).

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 follie*. 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

P.S—Fleury shall be taken care of. All the family send their love. In this join the General & Mrs. Washington & what is best, tis not in the stile of ceremony but sincerity.