

**“OPENING A DOOR TO
THEIR EMANCIPATION”
ALEXANDER HAMILTON
AND SLAVERY**

**AN ESSAY TO ADDRESS
RECENT ALLEGATIONS AGAINST
ALEXANDER HAMILTON AND
HIS HISTORY WITH SLAVERY**

By
Philo Hamilton
Michael E. Newton, secondary author

Published November 2020.

Philo Hamilton: Twitter [@PhiloHamilton](#)

Michael E. Newton: michael@michaelenewton.com

“OPENING A DOOR TO THEIR EMANCIPATION” ALEXANDER HAMILTON AND SLAVERY

By Philo Hamilton
Michael E. Newton, secondary author

INTRODUCTION

With the opening of the *Hamilton* musical on Broadway in New York City in 2015, interest in the life of Alexander Hamilton has soared. Since its debut, millions have seen the show at the theater and on television. Not only has Hamilton’s popularity grown, but his wife Eliza and two of her sisters, Angelica and Peggy, collectively known as the “Schuyler Sisters,” have also garnered abundant attention.

This attention has not been entirely positive. Many dispute the assertion by biographer Ron Chernow that Hamilton was an abolitionist. Indeed, Hamilton never claimed to be an abolitionist. In fact, the term abolitionist was rarely used in the 18th century. One of the most surprising critics of Hamilton on the topic of slavery has been the Schuyler Mansion in Albany, New York. They have for the last hundred years served as a public gathering place to present the home, family, and patriotic record of Philip Schuyler, Alexander Hamilton’s father-in-law. The musical tripled attendance at their location, and yet they recently published a negatively biased and error-filled essay about Alexander Hamilton and slavery.

The claims made in that essay, entitled “*As Odious and Immoral A Thing*”: *Alexander Hamilton’s Hidden History as an Enslaver* and authored by Jesse Serfilippi, should be read with skepticism and examined objectively prior to drawing conclusions. Serfilippi’s essay is riddled with errors, omissions, assumptions, speculations, and misrepresentations concerning the history of Alexander Hamilton on the subject of slavery.

To counter these false allegations against Alexander Hamilton, I offer a more complete and accurate evaluation of Hamilton’s history with slavery.

EARLY YEARS IN THE CARIBBEAN

In January of 1757,¹ Alexander Hamilton was born on the Caribbean island of Nevis. Eight years later, he moved with his family to the island of St. Croix. Ninety percent of the population

¹ Traditionally, Hamilton’s birth year was thought to be 1757. However, more recent evidence—the discovery of his mother’s probate record in the 1930s and research by Michael Newton in the 2010s—have uncovered a probable earlier year of birth. This essay will use 1757 because it fixes the age he was thought to be during his life.

on both islands were enslaved people primarily engaged in sugar production. The remaining ten percent of the population were mostly white plantation owners and merchants supporting the plantations. Hamilton's views on slavery were influenced by parents who inherited, purchased, owned, rented, and possibly sold enslaved persons during Hamilton's childhood. At the time of Hamilton's mother's death, she owned nine slaves. At her probate court hearing, Hamilton's uncle, attempting to get something of value for Alexander and his brother, claimed that each of the boys had been given a slave by their mother.² The claim was rejected by the court. The two Hamilton boys got nothing as their half-brother collected Rachel's entire estate.

In 1766 or early 1767, Hamilton started working as a clerk for New York merchant Nicholas Cruger, who ran an import-export business in Christiansted, St. Croix.³ In January 1771, Cruger received a shipment of 300 enslaved Africans to be sold on St. Croix. Hamilton, a fourteen-year-old clerk, may have participated in some capacity during this event.

Serfilippi argues that "it is more likely that Hamilton's exposure to slavery as a child caused him to internalize the lesson that enslavement was the symbol of success for a white man like himself and could lead to the higher station he sought."⁴ However, Hamilton wrote to a friend in 1769 that he "would willingly risk my life tho' not my Character to exalt my Station." His plan to do that is explained in one of his most famous sentences from this letter: "I wish there was a War."⁵ In other words, the military was the path that Hamilton hoped to pursue to elevate his station. When Hamilton talks about elevating his station, he is talking about improving his reputation, which was then called Fame. It was not about financial gain, and indeed Hamilton never sought riches.

In mid-1772, the Rev. Hugh Knox settled on St. Croix and took Hamilton under his wing. It has been suggested by many authors that Hamilton's exposure to slavery turned him against the practice. It is more likely that "Knox probably provided Hamilton with his earliest and certainly his deepest exposure thus far to the intellectual and religious arguments against slavery."⁶

This was Hamilton's experience with slavery in the Caribbean, in which as a child he had little choice and took little if any active part. Going forward, Hamilton's actions and decisions would reflect his feelings and attitudes toward this institution. His 18th century determinations were made in a world quite different from our own, and it is in his era and to his peers that he should be compared and judged.

² Ramsing, Holger Utke, *Alexander Hamilton's Birth and Parentage*, 1939, Trans. Solvejg Vahl, New York Public Library, 1951, p. 24; Hendrickson, Robert, *Hamilton I (1757-1789)*, Mason / Charter, New York City, 1976, p. 17.

³ Newton, Michael, *Discovering Hamilton*, Eleftheria Publishing, Phoenix, AZ, 2019, p. 172.

⁴ Serfilippi, Jessie. "As Odious and Immoral a Thing": *Alexander Hamilton's Hidden History with Slavery*, Schuyler Mansion State Historic Site, Albany, NY, 2020, p. 6.

⁵ *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, Ed. Harold Syrett, et. al., Columbia University Press, New York, vol. 1, p. 4. founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-01-02-0002

⁶ Newton, *Discovering Hamilton*, p. 227.

AMERICA: 1772–1804

In September 1772, Alexander Hamilton departed the Caribbean islands and headed to America for a formal education and a new beginning. Upon his arrival, he attended Francis Barber's grammar school in Elizabethtown, New Jersey, and then in September 1773 he enrolled in King's College in New York City.⁷ The political exigencies of the mid-1770s strongly influenced the direction of Hamilton's energies and education.

1774 – Pamphleteer: One of Hamilton's early roles for the patriotic cause was as a pamphleteer. On December 15, 1774, he published a pamphlet titled *A Full Vindication of the Measures of the Congress*. . . .⁸ In this essay, Hamilton wrote that "all men have one common original: they participate in one common nature, and consequently have one common right. No reason can be assigned why one man should exercise any power, or pre-eminence over his fellow creatures more than another; unless they have voluntarily vested him with it." On January 25, 1775, in *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, "A Philadelphian" used this quote to argue against "the iniquity of the Slave-Trade." Thus, Hamilton's arguments were understood to be philosophically opposed to slavery and were being quoted for that purpose.⁹

1779 – Black Soldiers: In March 1777, Hamilton became an Aide-de-Camp to General Washington. The following year, a new Aide-de-Camp by the name of John Laurens joined Washington's staff. Hamilton and Laurens discovered they had much in common, including the idea of enlisting Black soldiers. On March 14, 1779, Hamilton wrote a letter recommending John Laurens's plan to the President of the Continental Congress, John Jay. Laurens wanted to raise two, three, or four battalions of Negroes and then give them their freedom at the end of the war. Hamilton urged Jay to support the idea, writing that "an essential part of the plan is to give them their freedom with their muskets. This will secure their fidelity, animate their courage, and I believe will have a good influence upon those who remain, by opening a door to their emancipation."¹⁰

1780 – Marriage to Elizabeth Schuyler and the Schuyler Family: On December 14, 1780, in Albany, New York, Alexander Hamilton married Elizabeth Schuyler, daughter of Gen. Philip and Catherine Schuyler. The Schuylers had eleven children including Angelica (married to John Barker Church) and Margaret (also known as Peggy and later married to Stephen Van Rensselaer). Hamilton's exposure to the trading of enslaved persons was mostly due to his connection to Angelica and Peggy and their husbands.

According to the U.S. Census, Philip Schuyler owned thirteen slaves at his residence in Albany in 1790 and had eleven slaves at that location in 1800. He owned more at his farm outside the city. John B. Church was in Europe in 1790 but participated in the 1800 Census in New York

⁷ Newton, *Discovering Hamilton*, p. 208.

⁸ *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 1, pp. 45–78. founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-01-02-0054

⁹ Newton, Michael, *Alexander Hamilton: The Formative Years*, Eleftheria Publishing, Phoenix, Arizona, 2015, p. 106.

¹⁰ *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2, pp. 17–19. founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-0051

and reported owning no slaves. Stephen van Rensselaer in the 1790 Census had fifteen slaves and in the 1800 Census he recorded fourteen slaves.¹¹

Hamilton's role in slave related transactions has been described as that of a "middleman," which has a rather broad definition and is somewhat vague. In fact, Hamilton's involvement can best be described as that of a "banker." He handled the exchange of money between the two parties. There is no evidence he was involved in the actual purchase or sale of the slaves. Between 1780 and 1804, Hamilton was involved in three slave transactions for his sisters-in-law and their husbands, namely the sale of a woman by Peggy van Rensselaer and two separate purchases by John B. Church. Also, the Hamiltons were recipients of an enslaved woman and child purchased by Philip Schuyler. Each of these will be discussed below.

1781 – "The woman Mrs. H had of Mrs. Clinton": In late April 1781, four months after their wedding, Alexander and Eliza Hamilton set up a temporary residence at De Peyster's Point, New York. On May 22, Hamilton wrote to New York Gov. George Clinton telling him that he soon hopes to "receive a sufficient sum to pay the value of the woman Mrs. H had of Mrs. Clinton."¹² The editors of *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton* suggest this sentence provides one of the few pieces of extant evidence that Hamilton or his wife owned slaves. Similarly, Jessie Serfilippi of Schuyler Mansion asserts that when Hamilton says "to pay the value of the woman" it "implies Hamilton was paying Clinton *for* the woman. He did not say he was paying for the value of her labor as other historians have argued."¹³ While the meaning of Hamilton's statement may be unclear to us without further analysis, the two parties involved must have discussed this payment and the status of this woman prior to her arrival at De Peyster's Point and Clinton would have understood Hamilton when the latter told him he was waiting to receive "a sufficient sum to pay the value of the woman Mrs. H had of Mrs. Clinton." The question for us is to determine whether the Hamiltons purchased or only hired this woman from Mrs. Clinton?

Alexander Hamilton married Elizabeth Schuyler in Albany in December 1780. By early January 1781, he returned to the army as General Washington's Aide-de-Camp. Eliza left Albany soon thereafter to join Hamilton in New Windsor. On February 16, Hamilton notified Washington that he was resigning his position. While not the primary reason behind his resignation, it was no secret that Hamilton desperately wanted to lead soldiers into battle. At the time, Washington was prevented from promoting his aides ahead of other officers and giving them field commands. Hamilton knew the war was soon coming to an end and he was running out of time to win military recognition. He continued to serve Washington until April 22, 1781. Five days later, Hamilton wrote to Washington requesting a field command.¹⁴

¹¹ <https://www.ancestry.com/search/categories/usfedcen/>.

¹² *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2, p. 642. founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-1174

¹³ Serfilippi, "As Odious and Immoral a Thing", p. 15.

¹⁴ *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2, pp. 600–601. founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-05548

While waiting for Washington's response, Hamilton relocated to a house at De Peyster's Point on the east side of the Hudson River directly across from Washington's headquarters and the Continental Army. From there he could pester Washington for a field command and have easy access to Aide-de-Camp Tench Tilghman for daily updates. Eliza, who had probably been staying with her uncle John and aunt Gertrude Cochran in New Windsor, joined Hamilton at De Peyster's Point, where she spent two months with him before returning to Albany.

The house at De Peyster's Point was formerly the summer home of Abraham De Peyster, who had died in 1775, and the house had been vacant since then.¹⁵ The home was passed on to his brother Johannes, who by this time was 86 years old and living in Albany. Johannes had been married to Anna Schuyler, a second cousin twice removed from Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton. This connection possibly enabled the Hamiltons to stay in the house for free or at a discounted rate, a happy circumstance for a soldier short on funds. On April 28, Eliza had just moved into the house when Hamilton contacted the deputy quartermaster requesting an artificer to make him four kegs (buckets and barrels) and two pails with handles, which sound a lot like cleaning utensils, and a small table.¹⁶ From the start, Hamilton knew that his residence at De Peyster's Point would be temporary. It was only a matter of time before Hamilton received a field command and rejoined the army. The house therefore needed a quick cleaning, rather than the more thorough one which would have been required if he had intended to live there for a long time.

At some point, Mrs. Clinton, the wife of New York Gov. George Clinton, living in nearby Poughkeepsie, was asked by or offered Eliza some assistance. Mrs. Clinton made arrangements to have a woman come from her house to help Eliza. There is no detail of when the woman arrived or when she left. The only knowledge we have about the woman's status comes from Hamilton in his May 22 letter to Gov. Clinton when he wrote, "For some time past I have had a bill on France lying in Philadelphia the sale of which has been delayed on account of the excessive lowness of the exchange." He expected to soon "receive a sufficient sum to pay the value of the woman Mrs. H had of Mrs. Clinton. I hope the delay may be attended with no inconvenience to you."¹⁷

Unfortunately, there is no evidence of how much the Hamiltons eventually paid Clinton, which would have helped determine whether this woman was purchased or hired. However, Hamilton used the phrase "the woman Mrs. H had," indicating that the woman was no longer at the house nor with the Hamiltons and that this woman was not permanent to them and had only been a temporary hire.

It is also worth noting that Hamilton described the person from the Clintons as a "woman" and not a servant or a slave. Could the person Eliza hired have been a white person or a free black person? While there is no census data for 1781, we know from the 1790 U.S. Census report for the George Clinton household that in addition to himself, his wife, and his five daughters, there were other people in the house, namely a white woman, two free black persons, and eight slaves. While

¹⁵ Cring, Christopher, *The Most Important House in the American Revolution that Nobody Knew About*, p. 6.

¹⁶ *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2, p. 603. founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-1165

¹⁷ *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2, pp. 642–643. founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-1174

it cannot be known for sure what the status of the white woman was, it is very likely that the two free black persons were probably servants. This opens up the possibility that the person employed by Eliza could have been white, free Black, or an enslaved person.

A handwritten record from the 1790 U.S. Census for George Clinton Esq. The record is organized into columns for different demographic groups. The names 'Richard Varick' and 'George Clinton Esq.' are written in the first column. To the right, numbers are written in the other columns, representing the count of individuals in each category.

Richard Varick	1		2	1	1
George Clinton Esq.	1	1	7	2	8
1 free white males 16 & over	2	1	3		2

1790 U.S. Census (New York)

Source: <https://www.ancestry.com/search/categories/usfedcen/>

George Clinton Esq. / 1 / 1 / 7 / 2 / 8

1 free white males 16 & over / 1 free white males under 16 / 7 free white females / 2 other free (non-white) persons / 8 slaves

Author Forrest McDonald points out that “given Hamilton’s limited means at the time,” it is far more likely that Eliza, “in keeping with common practice, had merely hired a servant employed by or belonging to Mrs. Clinton.”¹⁸ Hamilton earned \$60 a month according to his pay records, though he had not been paid since August 1, 1780.¹⁹ This meager sum probably didn’t matter anyway since Hamilton was being paid in Continentals and the currency had been devalued so much that by this time it took 225 Continental dollars to make one dollar of specie.²⁰ Without having received any pay for nine months and the severe devaluation of the currency, Hamilton had to be very prudent with how he spent his financial reserves and could hardly afford to purchase a slave.

Finally, Jessie Serfilippi asserts that social custom required Hamilton to buy a slave. “She [Eliza] would expect Hamilton to provide her with an enslaved servant to aid her in the many duties she had to perform. This should not be surprising. Slave-ownership was so expected of everyone in the Hamiltons’ social class.” Serfilippi also states that there “is no documentation of him speaking out against these expectations.”²¹ To the contrary, Hamilton wrote to Eliza before their marriage, “But now we are talking of times to come, tell me my pretty damsel have you made up your mind upon the subject of housekeeping? Do you soberly relish the pleasure of being a poor mans wife? Have you learned to think a home spun preferable to a brocade and the rumbling of a waggon wheel to the musical rattling of a coach and six?”²² It seems Hamilton felt no pressure to keep up with the Schuylers, and after this letter, Eliza’s expectations of owning slaves would have been lowered.

In sum, there is no evidence that Hamilton purchased this “woman” from the Clintons. Instead, the evidence suggests a rental because (1) the woman appears to have worked for the Hamiltons

¹⁸ McDonald, Forrest, *Alexander Hamilton*, W.W. Norton, New York, 1979, p. 373.

¹⁹ *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 1, p. 192. founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-01-02-0078

²⁰ Hatfield, Stuart, “Continental Congress vs Continental Army: Paying for it all,” *AllthingsLiberty.com*, Jan. 2019.

²¹ Serfilippi, “*As Odious and Immoral a Thing*”, p. 15.

²² *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2, pp. 397–400. founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-02-02-0834

for just a short time, (2) there is no indication if she was white or black, (3) no indication whether she was free or enslaved, (4) Hamilton could hardly afford the price of a slave, (5) Eliza did not feel entitled to an enslaved person, (6) from the start this was always considered a temporary situation, and (7) when the time came for Hamilton to go back to the army, Eliza went home to Albany where she could use her family's slaves and therefore did not need her own enslaved person. Based on these factors, Hamilton more likely hired this woman rather than having purchased her.

1783 – Treaty of Paris: In a June 1, 1783, letter to Gov. Clinton, Hamilton complained that the state of New York was in violation of Article 5 of the draft treaty of peace, which prohibits the Americans from persecuting loyalists and confiscating their property, which Hamilton had no role in drafting or negotiating. Hamilton pointed out that New York, by violating Article 5 of the draft treaty, was giving the British a reason to renege on their end of the bargain. A further concern for Hamilton was that since the treaty was still in draft mode, that Americans will say that since it is not yet official (not signed) they cannot be held to the terms of the agreement. Hamilton stated that the “provisional or preliminary treaty is as binding from the moment it is made as the definitive treaty which in fact only develops explains and fixes more precisely what may have been too generally expressed in the former [draft treaty].” Hamilton continued, “Suppose the British should now send away not only the negroes but all other property and all the public records in their possession belonging to us on the pretence above stated should we not justly accuse them with breaking faith? Is this not already done in the case of the negroes, who have been carried away, though founded upon a very different principle a doub[t]ful construction of the treaty, not a denial of its immediate operation?”²³

Based on this letter, Jessie Serfilippi argues that Hamilton supported the American demand for the British to return the slaves they had already taken away. She then adds, “In 1795, he presented a completely different view,” saying that the proposed plan to force England to return “formerly enslaved people made free after the war . . . was wrong.” Serfilippi says that “Hamilton’s switch from advocating for the return of formerly-enslaved people by the British to writing it was immoral to take freedom from a person made free did not come from personal beliefs, but political ones.”²⁴

The above argument by Serfilippi is a misrepresentation of the text. First of all, she falsely claims that Hamilton’s June 1, 1783, letter to George Clinton, as quoted above, was written after the treaty was signed, but the signing did not take place until September 3, 1783. More importantly, Hamilton never said that he supported the return of formerly enslaved people. In fact, Hamilton pointed out that the “Negroes” had already been sent away and the concern was that “other property and all of the public records in their possession belonging to us” would also be sent away. At no point did Hamilton argue that these freed Blacks should be returned and re-enslaved.

Serfilippi also ignores a late 1789 summary of Hamilton’s October 1789 meeting with unofficial British Minister to the United States George Beckwith, in which Hamilton stated, “On our

²³ *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 3, pp. 367–392. founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-03-02-0244

²⁴ Serfilippi, “*As Odious and Immoral a Thing*”, pp. 2–3.

side there are also two points still unadjusted, the *Western Forts, And the Negroes*, although, as to the latter I always decidedly approved Lord Dorchester's conduct on that occasion, he could not do otherwise. To have given up these men to their Masters, after the assurances of protection held out to them, was impossible, and the Reply of Your Cabinet to our application on this subject was to me perfectly satisfactory."²⁵ Serfilippi claims that Hamilton argued in 1783 for the return of slaves but in 1795 argued against it, but here we see that Hamilton in 1789 said that he "always" opposed the return of these formerly enslaved people. As this 1789 statement was made prior to the return from France of Thomas Jefferson, the new Secretary of State, and before a political rivalry developed between Hamilton and Jefferson, Serfilippi's assertion that Hamilton changed positions for political reasons are not supported by the facts. Hamilton never supported the return of these freed slaves, "always" believed that the return of "those men to their Masters" would be "impossible," and held that the British refusal to return the formerly enslaved was "to me perfectly satisfactory."

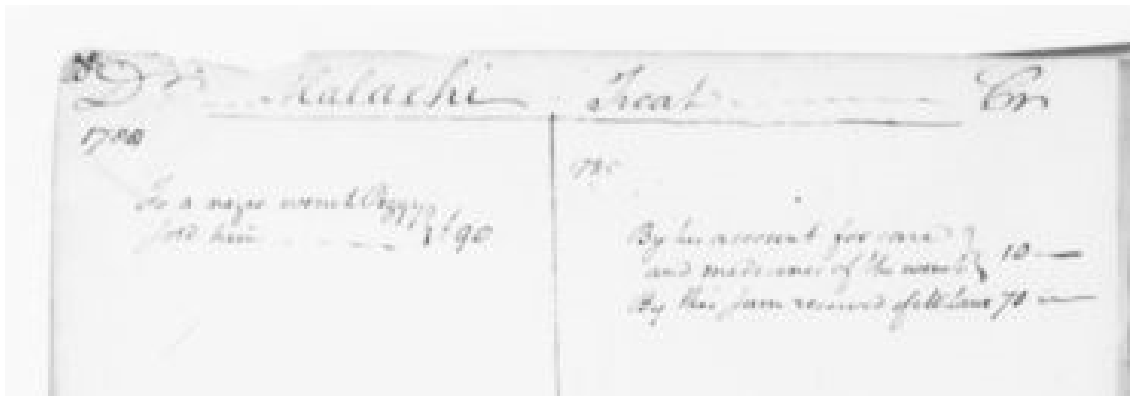
1784 – Hamilton's Cash Books: After the siege of Yorktown in October 1781, Hamilton returned to his wife in Albany and resigned from the army. By the end of 1782, he had qualified himself to practice law. In November 1783, Hamilton set up a law office on Wall Street in New York City. One of the tools he used to track his income and distributions was a "cash book." He had two of these books. The first covered the years 1782 to 1791 and the second from mid-1795 until his death. These books were intended for his personal use, tracking the flow of money from his legal practice. It also included entries related to his personal life, i.e., money to Eliza, donations, etc. In these books are entries for three transactions of enslaved people by Peggy Schuyler van Rensselaer and John B. Church. There is also a notation of the two enslaved people purchased for Hamilton by Philip Schuyler. Each of these will be discussed below. Outside of the Schuyler family, there are no other transactions recorded in Hamilton's cash books for the purchase or sale of enslaved people.

1784 – Peggy Schuyler van Rensselaer sells an enslaved person: There is a 1784 entry in Hamilton's cash book for Dr. Malachi Treat's account that reads, "A Negro wench Peggy sold him" in the amount of £90.²⁶

This highlights the challenge of understanding some of Hamilton's cash book entries. This specific entry could either mean that "A Negro wench [that] Peggy [Schuyler] sold [to] him [Dr. Malachi Treat]" or it could be read "A Negro wrench [named] Peggy [that was] sold [to] him [Dr. Malachi Treat]." A further analysis will make the entry's meaning clear.

²⁵ *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 5, p. 487. founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-05-02-0273

²⁶ *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 3, p. 21.



Cash Book #1 – Peggy sells enslaved person to Dr. Malachi Treat
Source: Alexander Hamilton Papers, Library of Congress

Dr. Malachi Treat spent the war in the Albany area and was a personal friend of Philip Schuyler and his family. Dr. Treat was not one of Hamilton’s legal clients but they were likely acquainted with each other. This cash-book entry is the only listing for Malachi Treat in the index of *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, so it is likely that he and Hamilton were not close friends. From Hamilton’s two other transactions for his Schuyler in-laws, we know that he always mentioned the name of the individual for whom he did the banking transaction but never mentioned the name of the enslaved person being bought or sold. In this case, “Peggy” is mentioned, pointing to Peggy Schuyler van Rensselaer.

In one place, Jessie Serfilippi writes that “when Hamilton purchased an enslaved person for a friend or family member, he always recorded who the transaction was carried out for.”²⁷ But in this case, Serfilippi decides that Peggy is not Peggy van Rensselaer but that the slave’s name was Peggy.²⁸

Despite claims to the contrary, it is clear that this cash-book entry was a transaction by Peggy van Rensselaer, for which Hamilton acted as her banker.

1784 – Peggy and Angelica want assistance getting a slave back: In 1784, Angelica Church, writing from Europe, reached out to Peggy van Rensselaer, who then reached out to Hamilton, requesting help in getting back a Negro by the name of Ben, who Angelica had sold for a term of years to Major William Jackson.²⁹ Major Jackson lived in Philadelphia, so Hamilton on November 11, 1784, sent a letter to John Chaloner, John B. Church’s business partner in Philadelphia, passing the request to him to handle. Chaloner reached out to Major Jackson, who replied back to Chaloner that he declines parting with Ben but says when Mrs. Church returns he will let her have him should she request it in person but will not part with him to anybody else. Chaloner responded

²⁷ Serfilippi, “As Odious and Immoral a Thing”, p. 10.

²⁸ Serfilippi, “As Odious and Immoral a Thing”, pp. 7–8.

²⁹ *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 3, pp. 584–585. founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-03-02-0390

back to Hamilton and he or Elizabeth presumably forwarded the information to Peggy or Angelica.³⁰ There is no known further correspondence on the subject, but Angelica and John Church returned to New York in June 1785 for a visit of about two months and then they returned to England. There is no record of whether or not Angelica went to Philadelphia to reclaim Ben.

Normally this would be the end of the discussion, but Jessie Serfilippi writes that Alexander Hamilton reached out to find an enslaved servant, Ben, so he could get him back for Angelica. Serfilippi implies that Hamilton was the initiator and therefore labels him a “slave trader.”³¹ Alas, Serfilippi fails to identify the Schuyler sisters, Angelica and Peggy, as the instigators in this affair. She also fails to mention the response from John Chaloner and Major Jackson.³² Finally she wrongly labels Hamilton a “slave trader,” based on incomplete research and incorrect assumptions, when in reality all Hamilton did was pass along some information between the parties involved.

1784 – John B. Church acquires enslaved woman: In Hamilton’s cash book, we find an entry in April 1784 in the account of John Chaloner, the agent for John B. Church in Philadelphia, that reads “By my draft in favor of Haym Solomon.” Hamilton acting as banker transferred £150 Pennsylvania Currency to Haym Salomon.³³ A later record shows, as will be discussed later, that Salomon was selling an enslaved woman, named Sarah, to John Barker Church. Apparently unaware of the cash-book entry and its connection to later events, Jessie Serfilippi did not mention it in her essay.

At the time of the transaction, April 1784, the Churches were still in Europe. About eight months after the sale, in January 1785, Haym Salomon died in Philadelphia. The Churches returned to New York in June 1785 but only stayed until early August 1785. There is no record of when or even if the slave Sarah ever joined the Church family. If she joined the family, there is no mention whether Sarah traveled with them overseas and no record of where she spent the years from 1785 until 1799.

In 1797, the Churches returned to America. Sarah surprisingly appeared at a January 1799 meeting of the New York Manumission Society, announced that she is owned by John B. Church, and requested to be manumitted. She is given her freedom at the next meeting of the Manumission Society. More on this later.

1785 – New York Manumission Society formed: On January 25, 1785, a group of New Yorkers met and formed a committee “to draw up a set of Rules for the Government of the said Society.” The group met again on February 4, at which time Alexander Hamilton and 31 other New Yorkers organized the Society for the Manumission of Slaves. At this meeting, Hamilton was made chairman of the Ways and Means Committee and later delivered a resolution that members

³⁰ *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 3, pp. 587–588. founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-03-02-0392

³¹ Serfilippi, “*As Odious and Immoral a Thing*”, p. 8.

³² *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 3, pp. 587–588. founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-03-02-0392

³³ *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 3, p. 12. www.loc.gov/resource/mss24612.029_0403_0454/?sp=7&r=-0.051,0.294,0.892,0.363,0

of the society begin their work by freeing their own enslaved people. The resolution failed. Later, in 1798, Hamilton was elected Counsellor for the New York Manumission Society.³⁴

1786 – Memorial to abolish the slave trade: On March 13, 1786, Hamilton and other memorialists signed a petition to the New York Legislature urging the end of the slave trade, “a commerce so repugnant to humanity, and so inconsistent with the liberality and justice which should distinguish a free and enlightened people.”³⁵

1787 – Constitutional Convention: On May 29, 1787, during a discussion on representation, Hamilton proposed basing representation on “the number of free inhabitants” excluding slaves, which would have reduced the power of the slave states. The Convention evaded the conflict by postponing the proposal.³⁶ Some say that Hamilton had a significant say in the three-fifths rule, but the discussion of that rule on June 11 does not support that claim. For a large part of the Convention, New York had no vote because the state lacked a quorum. After July 15, New York cast no votes. Hamilton was absent from the convention, except for two days, from June 29 to September 2, but he was there to help finalize the wording of the Constitution, to vote in favor of it, and to put his signature to the document.

1787 – African Free School created by the New York Manumission Society: In 1787, the African Free School was created in New York City at a time when slavery was crucial to the prosperity and expansion of New York. The African Free School was created by the New York Manumission Society, a group dedicated to advocating for African Americans, of which Hamilton was a leading member. The school’s explicit mission was to educate black children to take their place as equals to white American citizens. It began as a single-room schoolhouse with about forty students, the majority of whom were the children of enslaved persons, and by the time it was absorbed into the New York City public school system in 1835, it had educated thousands of children, a number of whom went on to become well known in the United States and Europe.³⁷

1790 U.S. Census: In an article on the U.S. Census, the New York Public Library pointed to a 1790 U.S. Census record of an Alexander Hamilton in New York City and believed it to be the Secretary of the Treasury.³⁸ This record shows that the family had two males aged sixteen and over, one male under age sixteen, and one female.

Schuyler Mansion’s Jessie Serfilippi chose to rely on this article instead of verifying the information. Since this census record did not accurately reflect the number of people in the Hamilton household, Serfilippi concluded (1) that U.S. Censuses are not accurate, (2) that this “heightens the likelihood that the people the Hamiltons enslaved were not recorded on the census,” and (3) the fact that no slaves are listed does not prove that Hamilton owned no enslaved persons.³⁹

³⁴ *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 3, p. 597. founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-03-02-0409

³⁵ *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 3, p. 654. founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-03-02-0503

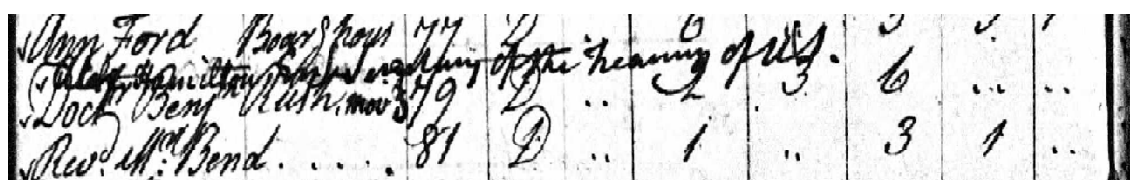
³⁶ Robertson, David Brian, *The Original Compromise*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2013, p. 179.

³⁷ <https://www.nyhistory.org/web/africanfreeschool/>.

³⁸ Sutton, Philip, “Stories from the U.S. Census,” New York Public Library, <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2020/04/13/federal-census-history-and-uses>.

³⁹ Serfilippi, “*As Odious and Immoral a Thing*”, pp. 24–25.

The New York Public Library and Jessie Serfilippi must have forgotten that in 1790 the U.S. government moved from New York City to Philadelphia. On October 20, 1790, Hamilton and his family left New York City. By October 26, 1790, they had moved into a rented house at 79 South Third Street in Philadelphia. In the 1790 Census records for Philadelphia, “Alexander Hamilton new secretary of the Treasury of US” appears inserted above Doctor Benjamin Rush at 79 South Third Street. Other U.S. Treasury employees appear in the census in a similar manner. Based on the move of the government from New York City to Philadelphia and from the number of family members, it is clear that the person identified by the New York Public Library and Jessie Serfilippi was not Alexander Hamilton the Secretary of the Treasury but rather was Alexander Hamilton the shoemaker, who lived at 64 Broadway in New York City.



1790 U.S. Census (Philadelphia)

Source: <https://www.ancestry.com/search/categories/usfedcen/>

Alexander Hamilton new secretary of the Treasury of US ¶ Doctor Benjamin Rush | 79 |

D | 2 | 3 | 6 | - | -

79 South Third Street | 2 free white males 16 & over | 3 free white males under 16 | 6 free white females | no other free persons | no slaves

The information for the Hamilton family in Philadelphia shows that there were two free white males 16 and over (Alexander + 1); 3 free white males under 16 (Philip, Alexander Jr., and James); six free white females (Eliza, Angelica, the orphan Fanny Antil, + 3); no other free persons; and no slaves. Although the numbers given in this census record do not match the Hamilton family, most families of sufficient means had servants, many of whom lived in the house with the family.

Just to be certain that the number of people listed in this house at 79 South Third Street belonged to the Hamilton household and not to the Rush household, further research reveals that (1) Benjamin Rush had moved to 83 Walnut Street, (2) a census record for 83 Walnut Street has Doctor Rush’s name on it, although the record is incomplete, (3) Benjamin Rush had a black slave by the name of William Grubber who would not be manumitted until 1792 or 1793, (4) the Rushes had a free black person by the name of Marcus Marsh also living with them, (5) there were no 1790 census records in Philadelphia for either Grubber or Marsh living somewhere else.⁴⁰

With this information, it is clear that the census record for 79 South Third Street could not have been for Dr. Benjamin Rush and therefore the numbers represent the people living in the Hamilton household in Philadelphia. Not to be overlooked is that the Hamiltons owned no slaves.

⁴⁰ Fried, Stephen, *Rush, Revolution, Madness & the Visionary Doctor Who Became A Founding Father*, Broadway Books, New York, 2018, pp. 316-317, 346, 349.

1795 – Hamilton pays wage to Negro woman: Hamilton’s cash book includes an entry dated June 25, 1795, stating that he “paid Judy Perkins (a Negro woman) for her wages several years ago, which she alleges was detained from her in consequence of a claim by Major Turner who demands her wages as his servant.”⁴¹ It is not clear from Hamilton’s information if Judy Perkins was enslaved then, enslaved now, or ever was enslaved. Hamilton’s cash-book entry specifically says the original payment of \$12.50 was made to Judy Perkins for her wages several years ago and that a Major Turner demanded her wages as his servant. The implication is that Judy felt she deserved the wage but was not permitted to keep it. Since Hamilton originally gave her the money, he must have considered it a wage to a free black woman. If Hamilton had thought her an enslaved person, then he would have given the money to Major Turner. This situation must have been brought to Hamilton’s attention and he generously decided to give her the \$12.50 wage again.

1795 – Jay Treaty Article VII – “Odious and Immoral”: During the War for Independence, approximately 2,000 enslaved persons sought refuge behind British lines. At the conclusion of the war, the American negotiators demanded that the treaty include language requiring Great Britain to return these enslaved people or compensate their former owners for their losses. For twelve years the British refused to comply with this demand. In 1795, when the Jay Treaty was being negotiated, the Americans insisted that the British comply. Hamilton conceded that Britain may have violated this article but refused to stand up for the slaveholders’ demand for the return of the slaves. Hamilton wrote, “In the interpretation of Treaties things odious or immoral are not to be presumed. The abandonment of negroes, who had been induced to quit their Masters on the faith of Official proclamations promising them liberty, to fall again under the yoke of their masters and into slavery is as odious and immoral a thing as can be conceived. It is odious not only as it imposes an act of perfidy on one of the contracting parties; but as it tends to bring back to servitude men once made free.”⁴²

1796 – “2 Negro servants purchased by him for me”: On December 17, 1795, Hamilton’s father-in-law Philip Schuyler and three associates purchased a property called Cosby Manor. Hamilton was engaged by them to collect and consolidate quarterly payments of \$378.55 from each of the buyers into a single payment to the seller.⁴³ For the second payment, Hamilton recorded in his cash book for Philip Schuyler’s account on March 23, 1796, that he received \$128.55 in cash from Nicholas Low, a New York merchant, plus \$250 in “stock,” totaling the \$378.55 needed for Philip Schuyler’s payment for the Cosby Manor purchase. What’s unusual about the \$250 in “stock” was a comment added by Hamilton that reads, “For 2 Negro servants purchased by him for me.”⁴⁴ Since this was posted in Schuyler’s account, it is understood that Philip Schuyler purchased two Negro servants for Hamilton.

⁴¹ *The Law Practice of Alexander Hamilton*, Ed. Julius Goebel Jr., Columbia University Press, New York, 1981, vol. 5, p. 373. www.loc.gov/resource/mss24612.029_0455_0542/?sp=10&r=-0.027,-0.061,1.144,0.466,0

⁴² *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 18, p. 519. founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-18-02-0317

⁴³ *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 19, pp. 200–203.

⁴⁴ *The Law Practice of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 5, p. 409.

Cash D ^t to Philip Schuyler		
for his sum received of Adow —		128.35
Stock D ^t to D ^t		
for 2 Negro servants purchased by him for me		250
		378.55

Cash Book #2 – Cosby Manor Transaction Quarterly Payment
Source: Alexander Hamilton Papers, Library of Congress

Hamilton probably was not surprised that Philip Schuyler purchased these slaves for him. Seven months earlier, on August 31, 1795, Schuyler wrote to Hamilton telling him that “the Negro boy and woman are engaged for you” and that Mr. Witbeck, manager for Schuyler’s son-in-law Stephen Van Rensselaer, was waiting on Hamilton “to conclude the bargain.”⁴⁵ It is not clear whether the term “engaged” was meant to imply a purchase or a hiring. Also, there is no evidence in Hamilton’s letters or his cash book that he ever completed the transaction. Philip Schuyler would have been aware of this inaction. There is a good chance that the two persons purchased by Schuyler were the same “Negro boy and woman” from the van Rensselaer estate that had been “engaged” for Hamilton.

While there is no indication that Hamilton refused this purchase, there are no slaves listed in the Hamilton household according to the U.S. Census for 1800 (see 1800 census below). The absence of slaves in the census brings to mind a comment made by John C. Hamilton, son and biographer of Alexander Hamilton. In 1840, John wrote about his father, “He never owned a slave; but on the contrary, having learned that a domestic whom he had hired was about to be sold by her master, he immediately purchased her freedom.”⁴⁶ John C. Hamilton, born in 1792, would have remembered these two people had they been part of the household. Moreover, Eliza Hamilton was still alive when John C. Hamilton wrote his book, and she either was the source of this information or would have been able to confirm it. In fact, the 1800 Census records four other (black) free persons and no enslaved persons in the house. Given that the two slaves Philip Schuyler purchased for Alexander Hamilton do not appear with the Hamiltons in the census as slaves and as there is no record of Hamilton selling these individuals, it is likely that Alexander Hamilton gave them their freedom, as John C. Hamilton claimed, and that they are among the four Other Free Persons counted with the Hamiltons in the 1800 U.S. Census.

Concerning the four “other free persons” in the household, it is interesting that many emancipated slaves chose to live in white households, as it appears these people did in Hamilton’s case.

⁴⁵ *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 19, pp. 203–204. founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-19-02-0027-0002

⁴⁶ Hamilton, John C., *The Life of Alexander Hamilton*, D. Appleton & Co., New York, 1834–1840, vol. 2, p. 280.

There were benefits for both the employer (24x7 access to help, people at the house when the head of the household or spouse were absent) and for the employee (housing, food, perhaps some security, especially not being captured by someone claiming they were escaped enslaved persons). Besides Hamilton, several members of the New York Manumission Society housed other free Black persons, including William Shotwell, Lawrence Embree, Willet Seaman, Melancton Smith, George Clinton, Aaron Burr, Egbert Benson, Matthew Clarkson, Daniel Tompkins, and Robert R. Livingston. (See the appendix at the end of this work.)

Note about Servants: Jessie Serfilippi suggests that almost any use of the word “servant” implies an enslaved man, woman, or child.⁴⁷ Noah Webster, a contemporary of Hamilton, in his *American Dictionary of the English Language*, defined “servant” as “A person, male or female, that attends another for the purpose of performing menial offices for him, [or] who is employed by another for such offices or for other labor, and is subject to his command. The word is correlative to master. Servant differs from slave, as the servant’s subjection to a master is voluntary, the slave’s is not. **Every slave is a servant but not every servant is a slave.**” The 1800 Census reports that the Hamilton’s had two unidentified white males between ages 26 to 44, an unidentified white female between the age of 16 and 25, and four free black persons (see 1800 Census below). Most likely these individuals provided some service to the Hamilton family and would have appropriately been called “servants.” If a free black person were performing the job of a domestic servant, would they not be called a servant? Also, if “servant” universally meant an enslaved person, why would Hamilton and so many other leading individuals of that age close their correspondence with the phrase “Your Obedient Servant”? Thus, a servant was a servant, a slave was a slave, all slaves were servants, but not all servants were slaves.

1796–1803 – Legal cases involving slavery: In Hamilton’s twenty years as an attorney, he participated and offered opinions in hundreds of cases. Schuyler Mansion’s Jessie Serfilippi writes, “In each case Hamilton took on, his clients trusted he would know enough about the institution of slavery, and the laws and finances surrounding it, to win the case for them. His clients’ desire to seek Hamilton’s opinion indicates that Hamilton was an authority figure on the subject of slavery; an expert whose opinion was worthy and reliable enough to solicit.”⁴⁸

With such statements, one would think Hamilton’s caseload on slavery would have been overwhelming. In fact, Hamilton argued only two cases associated with the Slave Trade Act, provided two legal opinions related to slavery, one on Negroes and the other on the Slave Trade, and participated in one case representing an individual on behalf of the New York Manumission Society. This is out of hundreds of cases in which he was involved over a twenty year period.

The fact is that cases involving slavery represented a very small percentage of Hamilton’s caseload, and the Slave Trade cases were more about the construction and ownership of ships rather than slavery itself. The following individuals and cases were noted in Hamilton’s cash book.

L. Ogden asks for Opinion (July 26, 1796). From Hamilton’s cash book is an entry that L. Ogden, attorney in New York, asking “for opinion concerning Negroes.” At the time there were

⁴⁷ Serfilippi, “*As Odious and Immoral a Thing*”, p. 15.

⁴⁸ Serfilippi, “*As Odious and Immoral a Thing*”, p. 13.

two “L. Ogden” attorneys—Lewis Ogden and Ludlow Ogden—in New York City, so it is not clear which Ogden was requesting the information nor is it known if the questions were of a personal or professional nature. Hamilton was paid \$10 for his legal opinion.⁴⁹

Vanderbilt v. M. Lann (February 17, 1797). The Manumission Society hired Hamilton as their counsel. The only detail about this case was that it concerned “Negroes sold to Scalle.” Hamilton was paid \$6.⁵⁰

John Juhel asks for Opinion (February 6, 1799). John Juhel was a French merchant in New York City specializing in the importation of wine. An entry in Hamilton’s cash book shows Hamilton charging him \$10 for an “opinion concerning slave trade.” On a separate line was a bill for \$20 for an “opinion concerning intercourse Bill & Petition to Court.” This case involved the ship *Germania*, which was charged with violating the current law that prohibited trade with French territories. Hamilton won this case but it had nothing to do with the Slave Trade.⁵¹

John Juhel v. Rhinelander (February 2, 1799). Schuyler Mansion’s Jessie Serfilippi somehow links John Juhel’s question to Hamilton on February 6, 1799, concerning the “Slave Trade,” discussed previously, with another case, Juhel v. Rhinelander, which is noted in Hamilton’s cash book on February 2.⁵² This case involved the plaintiff John Juhel and the brig *Jenny*, which was suspected of carrying contraband and seized by a British warship. The defendant, the insurance company of Rhinelander and Co., refused to pay the insurance policy because there was an issue of whether contraband goods were “lawful” within the meaning of the policy. Jessie Serfilippi writes that Hamilton was the lawyer for Juhel when in fact he was the lawyer for the defendant Rhinelander and Co. Hamilton lost the case. Regardless, this case had nothing to do with the slave trade.⁵³

The United States v. Robert Cumming and the *Young Ralph* (January 1802). This case was about a ship named the *Young Ralph*, which had previously been a slave ship, was recently sold without modification, and then seized by the government thinking it was still operating as a slave ship. They charged the owner with violation of the Slave Trade Act. This case was not so much about the Slave Trade as it was about the construction of the ship. Hamilton proved that when the ship was seized, it was not being used in the Slave Trade.⁵⁴

The *Isaac Sherman* v. The Schooner Exchange (ca. September 1803). In the Slave Trade Act of 1800, U.S. citizens were prohibited from having any interest in a vessel employed in the transportation of slaves from a foreign country. In this case, Hamilton represented the defendant, the Schooner Exchange, and proved not only that this ship was not involved in the slave trade but also

⁴⁹ *The Law Practice of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 5, p. 437.

⁵⁰ *The Law Practice of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 5, p. 477.

⁵¹ *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 22, pp.533–534. founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-22-02-0325

⁵² Serfilippi, “As Odious and Immoral a Thing”, p. 12.

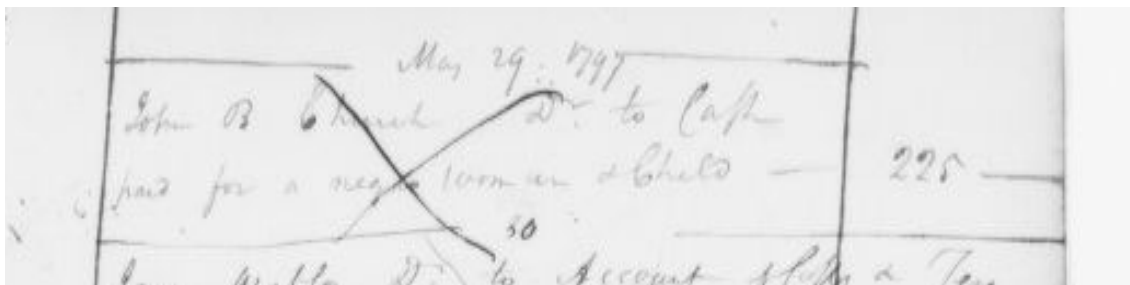
⁵³ *The Law Practice of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2, p. 657.

⁵⁴ *The Law Practice of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2, pp. 847–854.

that it was not owned by an American. This case was argued under the Slave Trade Act but it had little to do with the slave trade and more to do about who really owned the ship.⁵⁵

1797 – John B. Church purchases “a Negro woman and child”: Hamilton’s cash book shows that on May 29, 1797, he paid a \$225 bill for a Negro woman and child.⁵⁶ From this entry, biographer Nathan Schachner in 1946 concluded that Hamilton owned slaves.⁵⁷ In 1959, Hamilton biographer John C. Miller agreed with Schachner’s observation and decided that Hamilton was a slave owner.⁵⁸ Unfortunately, Schachner failed to observe that this entry was for John Church, and John C. Miller apparently never checked Schachner’s source material. Author Ron Chernow got it right by concluding that this transaction was indeed for John Barker Church.⁵⁹

John and Angelica Church, Eliza Hamilton’s sister and brother-in-law, had just returned to New York City from London on May 20, 1797.⁶⁰ John Church had been out of the country since 1785. Hamilton managed Church’s legal and business contract activities in New York. A few days after their arrival, on May 29, 1797, an entry in Hamilton’s cash book reads, “John B Church debit to cash paid for a Negro woman and child \$225.”⁶¹



Cash Book #2, May 29, 1797 – John B. Church account “for a negro woman & child”
Source: Alexander Hamilton Papers, Library of Congress

After this purchase, Hamilton met with John Church to review his account. For this meeting, Hamilton prepared a summary highlighting the last twelve months of activity.⁶² Near the beginning of this document, Hamilton writes “\$1008.12 = £403.5,” a conversion factor of 2.5. Beyond this entry, all amounts are stated in New York pounds. The \$225 transaction for “a negro woman and child” from his cash book was described in this summary as “paid price of Negro woman” in the amount of £90 New York currency. This summary along with the accompanying footnotes in *The*

⁵⁵ *The Law Practice of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2, pp. 857–858.

⁵⁶ *The Law Practice of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 5, p. 494.

www.loc.gov/resource/mss24612.029_0455_0542/?sp=34&r=0.486,-0.008,0.484,0.197,0

⁵⁷ Schachner, Nathan, *Alexander Hamilton*, Thomas Yoseloff, New York, 1946, pp. 183 and 449.

⁵⁸ Miller, John C., *Alexander Hamilton: Portrait in Paradox*, Harper & Brothers, New York, 1959, p. 122.

⁵⁹ Chernow, Ron, *Alexander Hamilton*, Penguin Press, New York, 2004, p. 211.

⁶⁰ *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 21, p. 91. founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-21-02-0049

⁶¹ *The Law Practice of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 5, p. 494.

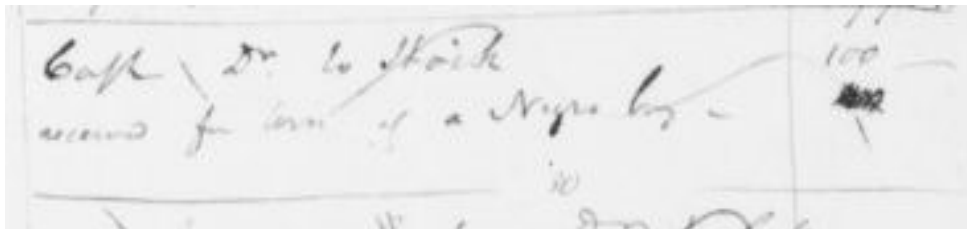
www.loc.gov/resource/mss24612.029_0455_0542/?sp=34&r=0.486,-0.008,0.484,0.197,0

⁶² *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 21, pp. 109–111. founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-21-02-0067

Papers of Alexander Hamilton make it clear this was one transaction recorded in both the cash book and included in the summary.⁶³

Schuyler Mansion's Jessie Serfilippi, however, not only fails to recognize the transition from dollars to pounds in this summary document, but she also declares the summary document to be a separate bill, thereby counting this one purchase of an enslaved woman and child by John B. Church as two separate transactions. She then incorrectly states that Hamilton never recorded this "summary transaction" in his cash book, pointing to this as evidence that there could be more such missing transactions. And finally, she wrongly guesses that maybe this additional enslaved person (who did not exist) was Sarah, the enslaved person from the 1799 Manumission Society meeting.⁶⁴

1798 – Hamilton received \$100 for the term of a Negro boy: Hamilton's cash book for June 25, 1798, shows that he "received for term of a Negro boy . . . \$100."⁶⁵ Who was this Negro boy? Was he the boy purchased by Philip Schuyler for Hamilton? Was he the boy that John B. Church purchased? Or was he a free black boy working for Hamilton but hired out by Hamilton to someone else for a period of time?



Cash Book #2, June 25, 1798 – Hamilton received \$100 for the term of a Negro boy
Source: Alexander Hamilton Papers, Library of Congress

In New York in 1800, there were 3,500 free black persons living in the city. To earn a living, they regularly hired themselves out. There is no information regarding the treatment of the \$100 "received for term of a Negro boy." Whether the money was kept by Hamilton, given to John Church, given to the boy, given to his mother or someone else is not known.

1799 – Manumission Society frees enslaved woman belonging to John B. Church: In Hamilton's cash book in the account of John Chaloner, agent for John B. Church in Philadelphia, as discussed earlier, we find an entry in April 1784 that reads, "By my draft in favor of Haym Salomon." Hamilton appears to have been the banker transferring £150 Pennsylvania Currency to Haym Salomon.⁶⁶ Fifteen years later, the minutes of a January 1799 meeting of the New York Manumission Society read, "A black woman by the name of Sarah was brought from the state of Maryland around about six [sixteen?] years since by Holm Salmon [Haym Salomon] who sold her

⁶³ *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 21, pp. 109–111. founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-21-02-0067

⁶⁴ Serfilippi, "As Odious and Immoral a Thing", pp. 9–10.

⁶⁵ *The Law Practice of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 5, p. 555.

www.loc.gov/resource/mss24612.029_0455_0542/?sp=46&r=-0.032,0.077,0.828,0.337,0

⁶⁶ *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 3, p. 12.

www.loc.gov/resource/mss24612.029_0403_0454/?sp=7&r=-0.051,0.294,0.892,0.363,0

[illegible]

0 white males under 10 yrs. / 0 white males 10 to 15 / 3 white males 16 thru 25 / 7 white males 26 thru 44 / 1 white male 45 and over / 0 white females under 10 / 0 white females 10 thru 15 / 3 white females 16 thru 25 / 6 white females 26 thru 44 / 0 white females 45 and over / 0 all other free persons / no slaves / 20 Household members

1799 – New York Slave Trade Law: Hamilton was a leading member of the New York Manumission Society when in 1799 they successfully pushed into law the gradual abolition of slavery in New York. This was a considerable achievement in a state where slavery was a real presence.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Brookhiser, Richard, *Alexander Hamilton, American*, Simon & Schuster, 1999, pp.175–176.

of “slaves” showed none. Since there is no record of Hamilton selling any enslaved persons, the two slaves acquired from his father-in-law in 1796 appear to have been, as John C. Hamilton stated, manumitted by Hamilton prior to the 1800 census and were presumably working as domestic servants in Hamilton’s home. The general consensus among Hamilton historians and biographers is that there is no definitive evidence that Hamilton ever owned slaves.⁷⁰

Nicholas Lou	2	3	2		1	1		1	3		1	3	17
Alexander Hamilton	2	2	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	4		17
Paschal A Smith		1		1	1	1		2	2		2		10

1800 U.S. Census (New York City)

Source: <https://www.ancestry.com/search/categories/usfedcen/>

Alexander Hamilton | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4 | - | 17

2 white males under 10 yrs. (John and William) | 2 white males 10 to 15 (Alex Jr. and James) | 1 white male 16 thru 25 (Philip) | 2 white males 26 thru 44 (both unknown) | 1 white male 45 and over (Alex Sr. accepting birth year of 1755 or earlier) | 1 white female under 10 (Elizabeth) | 1 white female 10 thru 15 (Angelica if census done before September 25, 1800 | 1 white female 16 thru 25 Angelica if census done after September 25, 1800 | 1 white female 26 thru 44 (Elizabeth) | 1 white female 45 and over (unknown) | 4 all other free (non-white) persons | no slaves | 17 Household members

According to the New York City Directories of 1799, 1801, and 1802, Hamilton had a law office at 69 Stone Street. Sometime in 1800 he moved his law office to 36 Greenwich Street for a short time. During these years that these properties were his office and the U.S. Census could have been taken, there is no evidence that anyone, free or slave, resided at these locations. If someone was living at Hamilton’s law office, there would be a census record listing the office and the number of people residing there.

1804 - Letter by Angelica Church: On June 14, 1804, Angelica wrote to her son Philip that the Hamiltons were throwing a party “and they are without a saelev (slave)” to help them.⁷¹ This is yet another piece of evidence showing that the Hamiltons did not own slaves.

1804 - Hamilton’s Papers at Death: Prior to his fatal duel in July 1804, Hamilton compiled several detailed records, including (1) his Last Will and Testament, (2) Statement of my property and Debts, and (3) An Explanation of his Financial Situation. In these documents Hamilton listed no slaves as assets in the modest estate he left to Eliza and their children.⁷²

1804 - Debts due to A. Hamilton: Among Hamilton’s final papers is a power of attorney to his brother-in-law John Barker Church to collect any outstanding debts owed to him. On October 13, 1804, Dominick T. Blake was engaged to assist in collecting these outstanding debts. Among

⁷⁰ Some of those that state that there is no definitive proof include: Michael Newton, Richard Sylla (2016, p. 150); Stephen Knott (2015, p. 252); William G. Chrystal (2009, p. 98); Ron Chernow (2004, p. 210); Richard Brookhiser (2004, p. 176); Willard Sterne Randall (2003, p. 293); Forrest McDonald (1982, p. 373); Broadus Mitchell (1962, p. 339).

⁷¹ Brookhiser, *Alexander Hamilton, American*, p. 176.

⁷² Sylla, Richard, *Alexander Hamilton*, Sterling Publishing, New York, 2016, p. 150; *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 26. pp. 283–286 and 299–300.

the Alexander Hamilton Papers at the Library of Congress is a single sheet of paper, not part of the last documents left by Hamilton, titled “Debts due to A. Hamilton,” undated and unsigned.⁷³ It is not clear if this document was prepared by John Church, Dominick Blake, or Nathaniel Pendleton.

The image shows a handwritten document with the following text and calculations:

House	£ 2200 -
Furniture & Library	500
Servants	200
	<hr/>
	3900
	1212
	<hr/>
	1888

*Debts owed to A. Hamilton and Personal assets [after 7/14/1804, authorship uncertain]
Source: Alexander Hamilton Papers, Library of Congress*

The document includes a list of 17 debtors with various amounts due. It also includes a simple calculation of Hamilton’s personal net worth with three line items. The first item is his house, the Grange, which on this document is valued at £2200. In another record, Hamilton estimated the value of this house at \$25,000,⁷⁴ but Hamilton also had an outstanding mortgage of over \$15,000,⁷⁵ leaving a net balance of just under \$10,000. At an exchange rate of about \$4.50 for each £1 sterling,⁷⁶ the £2200 converts to just under \$10,000. The next line item is Furniture and Library. Hamilton estimated these items along with his horses and carriages at \$3600.⁷⁷ Converting the dollars to pounds sterling gives a total of £800, as recorded on this brief list of assets. Finally, the line item for Servants according to Hamilton’s papers should be £0. In his last documents he lists no servants as assets.⁷⁸ However, the individual who wrote this document must have thought the black workers in the house were valued at £100, not knowing if these servants were free black persons

⁷³ www.loc.gov/item/mss246120766 (Image 76).

⁷⁴ *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 26, p. 284. founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-26-02-0001-0243

⁷⁵ *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 26, p. 285 (#2 and #3). founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-26-02-0001-0243

⁷⁶ <https://www.measuringworth.com/calculators/exchange/>.

⁷⁷ *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 26, p. 284. founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-26-02-0001-0243

⁷⁸ *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 26, p. 283–284. founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-26-02-0001-0243

or slaves. Two of the values on this list are hard to read, but we know the above numbers to be correct because adding the amounts for the house (£2200), furniture (£800), and servants (£100) gives a subtotal of £3100. To finish the calculation, the amount of £1212 from the top of this sheet representing a portion of Hamiltons' remaining debt is deducted, leaving a total net of £1888.

Looking at this list, there is something going on with the value given for Servants not seen in the other line items. It appears that there is an "x" just in front of the 100. Did something change? Is this an indication that the £100 was an error? Did the author of this document learn that the domestic servants were free black persons? If so, it appears that the individual who created this net-worth calculation learned after the fact that Hamilton had no slaves available to be sold. All he could do was to ex out this item after the document had been completed to show there was an error.

Schuyler Mansion's Jessie Serfilippi uses this list as proof of Alexander Hamilton owning slaves. However, she reads the list a little differently. While she agrees that the value of the house is £2200, she gives the amount for furniture and library as £300, likely because the "8" is faint and she did not calculate the sums. Also, she reads the amount for the servants as £400 because that number is also hard to read and again Serfilippi failed to run the numbers.⁷⁹ When the numbers Serfilippi uses are added together, the £2200 + £300 + £400 totals £2900 rather than the correct number £3100 reflected in the document. The £3100 amount, which is also difficult to read, can be verified by adding the £1888 and the £1212.

In Hamilton's power of attorney to John Church, he left specific instructions that debts collected should be "applied first towards the payment of all and every debt and debts which I owe to my household and other servants and labourers, and to the Woman who washes for Mrs. Hamilton."⁸⁰ This statement indicates that Hamilton's servants and laborers were paid wages, not enslaved, and Hamilton honorably gave them first claim on his estate. Yet again, it is clear that Hamilton owned no slaves. In contrast, he employed free blacks and ensured that debts owed to them be paid prior to any others.

SUMMARY

A recent essay by Jessie Serfilippi published by the Schuyler Mansion State Historic Site claims to reveal, according to the work's subtitle, "Alexander Hamilton's Hidden History as an Enslaver." The errors, omissions, assumptions, speculations, and misrepresentations in that essay called for a more complete and accurate evaluation of Hamilton's history with slavery.

For the first third of his life, Alexander Hamilton was exposed daily to an environment in which slavery was practiced. One or both of Hamilton's parents inherited, purchased, owned, rented, and possibly sold slaves. He saw how slaves were treated both in the city and on the plantations. As a clerk at a mercantile company, he witnessed and perhaps was involved in the importation of slaves from Africa. But at this point in his life, he had no choice in these matters and his

⁷⁹ Serfilippi, "As Odious and Immoral a Thing", p. 26.

⁸⁰ *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 26, pp. 301–302. founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-26-02-0001-0258-0001

opinions on the subject are not known. At the same time, Hamilton became a student of the Rev. Hugh Knox, who despite owning slaves, argued in his religious writings that slaves had just as much right to freedom as whites.

Hamilton's escape from the Caribbean did not mean an escape from the institution of slavery. New York was the largest slaveholding state in the North. Many of Hamilton's new friends owned slaves (see the Appendix at the end), but he also befriended many people who opposed the entire system of slavery. Even though Hamilton's attention in his early years in America was focused on education and the beginnings of the revolution, he found an opportunity to express his opinion about the right of every man to be free in a political pamphlet.

The next phase of Hamilton's life was focused on the military and winning the War for Independence. Even here he found an outlet with fellow aide-de-camp John Laurens to promote the inclusion of blacks in the army by suggesting that with training they were every bit as capable as white soldiers and arguing that these slaves should be given "their freedom with their muskets."

Hamilton's marriage into the Schuyler family in 1780 brought him closer to the enslaved person. His father-in-law Philip Schuyler owned slaves, as did his brother-in-law Stephan van Rensselaer. They had thirteen and fifteen slaves at their residences, respectively, according to the 1790 Census. They each had more slaves on their farms outside the city. Another brother-in-law, an Englishman John Barker Church, was a successful businessman. Hamilton became an attorney with banking skills and relationships and would handle John Church's business in New York City. In 1784, Hamilton acted as banker when his sister-in-law Peggy Schuyler van Rensselaer sold a female slave and again served as a banker for John Church when he purchased an enslaved woman. The only other time Hamilton was involved in a slave transaction was again as a banker for John Church in 1797 when Church purchased a woman and her child. We know of these three transactions (four people in total) because Hamilton recorded them in his cash book. It appears likely, based on census records, that three of these enslaved persons were manumitted. There is no evidence in Hamilton's books that he was ever involved in a slave transaction for anyone except for his wife's relatives.

For Alexander and Elizabeth Hamilton, there are two instances, one in 1781 and the other in 1796, where questions have been raised about slave ownership. In 1781, the Hamiltons set up a temporary, two-month residence opposite the Continental Army. They needed assistance cleaning a house and had help from a woman sent to them by Gov. Clinton's wife. Hamilton's language in a letter mentions they "had" this woman from Mrs. Clinton, implying that the woman was rented and had already departed. There is no evidence regarding whether this woman was white, free Black, or an enslaved person, but the evidence shows that the Hamiltons rented this woman rather than having purchased her. Then in 1796, Hamilton wrote in his cash book that he received two servants valued at \$250 from his father-in-law Philip Schuyler. There is no evidence that Hamilton refused to accept these enslaved persons, but in the 1800 census, as in the 1790 census, there are no slaves living with the Hamiltons. There are, however, four free black persons living with them in 1800. Hamilton's son and biographer, John Church Hamilton, said that his father "never owned a slave; but on the contrary, having learned that a domestic whom he had hired was about to be

sold by her master, he immediately purchased her freedom.”⁸¹ It thus appears likely that Hamilton gave these two enslaved persons their freedom.

Schuyler Mansion’s Jessie Serfilippi says that “Hamilton was an authority figure on the subject of slavery; an expert whose opinion was worthy and reliable enough to solicit.”⁸² She fails to mention that Hamilton, in hundreds of legal cases, was involved in just two cases that involved the Slave Trade Act, neither of which was about slaves but rather were about ship owners and slave-ship construction, and he offered legal opinions to just two others, and was counsel for the Manumission Society once.

The misrepresentations by Schuyler Mansion’s Jessie Serfilippi is not limited to Hamilton’s legal career. In several instances, Serfilippi presents a skewed history of Hamilton and then draws unsupportable conclusions, such as Hamilton being “required” to purchase a slave for Eliza, missing entries in his cash book, the U.S. Census being unreliable, and that Hamilton was involved in transactions to buy and sell slaves that did not involve a Schuyler family member. There are misrepresentations of his 1781 rental of a person from the Clintons, his position on the 1783 Treaty of Peace, the 1784 sale of a slave by Peggy van Rensselaer, the 1784 purchase by John Church of the slave Sarah, the Hamilton household appearing in the 1790 U.S. Census, the 1797 purchase of a woman and child by John Church, her explanation of the 1799 manumission of Sarah, and her understanding of the numbers from the loose page of outstanding debts.

During his life Hamilton was involved with a number of organizations that promoted the manumission of enslaved persons. As a legislator he signed a memorial to abolish the slave trade. As a statesman he supported the Jay Treaty and rejected the return of slaves taken by the British. As an individual he was a leading member of the New York Manumission Society where he promoted the manumission of slaves owned by Society members, helped set up a school for black children, and helped pass a law to gradually outlaw slavery in New York.

CONCLUSION

In sum, there is no evidence that Hamilton owned slaves or was an “enslaver.” While there is evidence that he helped his in-laws with slave transactions, it appears that Hamilton in these transactions was acting merely as a banker. There is no indication he had any involvement in conducting the transactions themselves or in the physical transfer of ownership of the enslaved persons. Regarding Hamilton himself, there are at least five pieces of evidence—two census records, a contemporary statement by Angelica Schuyler Church, a comment by John C. Hamilton in his biography of his father, and the lists of assets Hamilton drew up just prior to his death—indicating that Alexander Hamilton did not own any slaves.

Considering the era in which Hamilton lived, the challenges he faced, and his accomplishments, it is not difficult to understand why he did not make opposition to slavery his primary focus.

⁸¹ Hamilton, *The Life of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 2, p. 280.

⁸² Serfilippi, “*As Odious and Immoral a Thing*”, p. 13.

His attention was on building a nation. Unfortunately, that meant neglecting other important matters, not just slavery but also his own financial well-being. Nevertheless, Alexander Hamilton was on the right side of the slavery issue. In addition to not owning slaves, he actively sought to abolish the evil institution in his own state. Rather than being an “enslaver,” Hamilton opposed slavery, advocated for manumission, and supported enslaved and freed blacks to the extent that his limited means allowed.

APPENDIX

1790 U.S. Census: Among some of Alexander Hamilton's peers, the 1790 Census reveals their ownership of enslaved people:

Richard Varuck	-	-	-	-	-	-
George Clinton Esq.	1	1	7	2	8	
James Desbrosses	2	1	3		2	

George Clinton: 8 slaves

Source: <https://www.ancestry.com/search/categories/usfedcen/>

Bell Graham	1	16	1
Robert Livingston	1	6	6
	75	52	70

Robert R. Livingston: 6 slaves

Anthony Caloune	1	1	2	5
Asen Burr	1	2	3	4
William Cammeyer	43	36	75	18 37

Aaron Burr: 5 slaves

Source: <https://www.ancestry.com/search/categories/usfedcen/>

John Sidde	2	3	2	1
John Day	2	3	7	5
John Lamb	4		2	

John Jay: 5 slaves

Source: <https://www.ancestry.com/search/categories/usfedcen/>

