

ALEXANDER HAMILTON AND SLAVERY

A Commentary on Recent Publications on Alexander Hamilton's Relationship with Slavery

The Alexander Hamilton Awareness Society

The Alexander Hamilton Awareness Society (The AHA Society) supports accurate information on Founding Father Alexander Hamilton and welcomes new research on his life. Through careful study of primary sources, scholars are able to present a clearer and more accurate picture of the events of the past. Recently, the topic of Alexander Hamilton and slavery has been at the forefront following the publication of two papers on the subject.

On November 9, 2020, the *New York Times* article "Alexander Hamilton, Enslaver? New Research Says Yes" brought to national attention research done by Jessie Serfilippi, historical interpreter of the Schuyler Mansion Historic Site, and published by the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation. The publication, entitled "'As Odious and Immoral a Thing' – Alexander Hamilton's Hidden History as an Enslaver," analyzes several entries in Hamilton's cash books, letters to and from him and to his wife Elizabeth, and "other related primary accounts." Based on these documents, Serfilippi challenges the oft-cited narrative that Alexander Hamilton was an abolitionist and concludes that Hamilton was an "enslaver" himself and that "his involvement in the institution of slavery was essential to his identity, both personally and professionally."

Aware of the Schuyler Mansion's publication, a group of historians, who had previously researched Hamilton's relationship with slavery, began work on an independently-published paper entitled "Opening a Door to Their Emancipation – Alexander Hamilton and Slavery." This paper was published under the collective pseudonym of Philo Hamilton, with Michael E. Newton listed as a secondary author. It has since been expanded, and Version 3.0 was published on December 21st. The paper reviews the primary sources cited in Serfilippi's publication, contests the conclusions made, and shares additional primary sources on the subject, bringing a fuller approach to the subject. Philo Hamilton concludes

“Serfilippi’s essay is riddled with errors, omissions, assumptions, speculations, and misrepresentations concerning the history of Alexander Hamilton on the subject of slavery.”

Since our founding almost a decade ago, the AHA Society has dedicated itself to reviewing and promoting the most scholarly and accurate information about Founding Father Alexander Hamilton’s life and legacy. During these 10 years, we have extensively scrutinized thousands of primary and secondary sources connected with Hamilton and consulted professionally with some of the top history professionals in the country. Thanks to increasing online access to primary sources, transcriptions, and various other research materials, historians such as Michael E. Newton and Philo Hamilton have been able to make new discoveries, update their research, and correct erroneous information that had previously been accepted as factual. However, some publications continue to propagate myths and mischaracterizations without the proper backing of primary sources or even a deep understanding of relevant background information.

The subject of Alexander Hamilton and his relationship to slavery is something that every serious and seasoned Hamilton researcher has examined at some point. Despite Serfilippi’s claims, there is nothing “hidden” about the evidence, as Hamilton’s papers have been available in printed form for decades. As an organization specializing in Alexander Hamilton, we have promoted research on all the documentation and records available that are now being discussed in the conclusions and assertions of the Schuyler Mansion publication. In our past research on Hamilton’s personal involvement with slavery, we have not encountered proof that he was an enslaver. Additionally, several of the records that could provide a better understanding on the subject are incomplete, making it impossible to attempt an interpretation without dangerously stepping into the realm of speculation.

In response to Serfilippi’s recent publication, with its new and forceful assertions, the AHA Society took the time to revisit and further scrutinize those records. After a thorough review, our previous conclusions remain unchanged: None of the records currently available prove that Alexander Hamilton was a slaveholder or that he himself engaged in the sale and purchase of enslaved individuals. To call Alexander Hamilton an enslaver and to assert that slavery was essential to his identity in the absence of conclusive evidence, is an ungrounded and misleading interpretation. By claiming that slavery is essential to his identity, Serfilippi swings the pendulum from claims that he was a staunch abolitionist too far in the other direction, and in her effort to end one myth, her conclusions have created a new one.

The historical record shows, in fact, abundant evidence that Hamilton opposed slavery, promoted manumission, and promoted the education of those formerly enslaved. None of these major historical facts were even mentioned in the Schuyler Mansion publication.

Philo Hamilton first approached the AHA Society several months ago to inform us of their ongoing research and to request that the AHA Society review their work prior to its publication. This review process is a service the AHA Society regularly provides to researchers and authors as part of our society's mission. However, following the publication of the *New York Times* article, Philo Hamilton felt that a quick response was necessary and accelerated the publication of their paper. Following its publication, the AHA Society was asked to help make it available to the public. We decided to make both Philo Hamilton's and Serfilippi's articles available to the public by posting them on the AHA Society's website - without commentary - so that the public could read them in their entirety and determine their merits. We also stated that the AHA Society would thoroughly review the publications and share its own independent conclusions. As requested, we respected the wishes of the Philo Hamilton authors for anonymity. It was later made public that Michael Newton was one of the main contributors.

None of the AHA Society board members are contributing authors or were involved in the writing of either publication. Over the years, the AHA Society has worked with both the Schuyler Mansion State Historic Site and Jessie Serfilippi, as well as several contributors to Philo Hamilton, including Michael E. Newton. At various times, the AHA Society has held joint programming and engaged professionally with these parties. We categorically reject all personal attacks on social media platforms that have targeted the various authors. It is important to highlight that our focus in this statement is on the content of the essays, independent of these relationships.

The AHA Society highlights the meticulous research and scholarship of Philo Hamilton, which not only addressed critical errors and missing pieces of information of the Schuyler Mansion publication, but also added a whole new dimension of data for a more complete review of Alexander Hamilton's relationship with slavery.

By reading Philo Hamilton's work, with its careful attention to detail, one can sense the combined years of research experience and knowledge of Hamilton's life of the many authors involved. Their publication is exhaustive and clearly reflects the importance of author collaboration and consultation among experts on the subject - for many details could easily escape a single researcher, especially one with a different area of expertise. Philo Hamilton and Michael E. Newton have been invaluable sources of information and research for historians of Hamilton. Newton has dedicated the last nine years of his life to studying Alexander Hamilton's life through primary sources and other documents. He has always corrected and updated his own work when new evidence warrants it.

Philo Hamilton points out many critical errors in the Schuyler Mansion publication, which, for example, cites the wrong 1790 U.S. Census entry, that of Alexander Hamilton (a shoemaker), residing in New York City, rather than “Alexander Hamilton new secretary of the Treasury of the US,” who had already taken up residence in the new capital of Philadelphia.

While certain inferences can come down to interpretation of documents, the Philo Hamilton publication provides additional documentation and further historical context to provide more accurate conclusions and to prevent rushed interpretations based on what are in many cases incomplete records.

Recording transactions made on behalf of clients with other individuals was standard professional practice for a lawyer. Hamilton’s cashbooks show that he recorded transactions regarding the purchase of enslaved people on at least three occasions. However, all of these transactions were made not by him, but by members of the Schuyler family, his in-laws. This type of transaction had to be handled by an attorney so that it would be on record, and Hamilton recorded it in his cashbook for their accounts.

In spite of being surrounded by the institution of slavery from a very early age, Hamilton clearly distinguished himself as one of the most progressive Founding Fathers. There is abundant evidence of his opposition to slavery and involvement in anti-slavery institutions, such as the New York Manumission Society, as well as proposals for laws opposing the practice of slavery.

Additional research about slavery is something sorely needed during this time of public reckoning with its structural legacies and horrors. Because this is such an important topic to get right, we encourage individuals, historians, and institutions to continue studying and researching this subject carefully to ensure accurate interpretation of the historical record, with proper context.

The AHA Society is committed to making the most up-to-date and scholarly accurate information of Alexander Hamilton and the Founding Era readily available. Currently, there is no evidence that Alexander Hamilton ever owned or purchased slaves for his own personal use, that he was an enslaver, or that slavery was essential to his identity, either personally or professionally. If new records are discovered, we will evaluate them and share our findings.

In conclusion, the AHA Society recommends the article “Opening a Door to Their Emancipation – Alexander Hamilton and Slavery” Version 3.0, by Philo Hamilton and Michael E. Newton, as the most comprehensive and accurate scholarly study on the subject to date. As always, we look forward to new research and the perspective it will give on Alexander Hamilton’s life.