



Taylor & Francis  
Taylor & Francis Group

---

Alexander Hamilton, His Friends and Foes

Author(s): Broadus Mitchell

Source: *The Historian*, February, 1957, Vol. 19, No. 2, ALEXANDER HAMILTON BICENTENNIAL COMMEMORATIVE ISSUE (February, 1957), pp. 132-143

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24436536>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Taylor & Francis, Ltd. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Historian*

JSTOR

## *Alexander Hamilton, His Friends and Foes*



BROADUS MITCHELL\*

ALEXANDER HAMILTON was one of the most resourceful men in American history. As Jefferson said ruefully, he was a host in himself. Perhaps nobody in public life has stood less in need of briefing by associates than he. This was true even when he had double responsibility, for devising policy and for administering an expanding department, as first Secretary of the Treasury. Indeed his self-sufficiency was a fault. His eager creativeness, matched by indefatigable execution of his projects, kept him from deputing subordinate tasks to others who would have conserved his energies. As it was, he wore himself out by the time he was middle-aged, and in the last years was making costly drains on his marvellous nervous force.

Consequently it is not surprising that he was not a partner in any enduring collaboration, with give and take and mutual amendment such, for instance, as marked the teamwork of Jefferson and Madison. Two partial exceptions occur — his cooperation with Madison and Jay in production of *The Federalist*, and his intimate twenty year participation in the career of Washington. The first was an episode, influential but brief. Even so, with due acknowledgment of the contribution of his colleagues, he wrote the major share of the papers. As to the second — the blend of efforts of Hamilton and Washington in erecting the new nation — it was a unique joint accomplish-

\* Mr. Mitchell is a professor of economics at Rutgers University and a member of the editorial board of the Columbia University project for publishing the Hamilton papers. He is preparing a two-volume *Life of Alexander Hamilton*, the first volume of which will be published in 1957.

## Hamilton's Friends and Foes

ment, as will be seen in a moment. For the rest, Hamilton enjoyed the cordial, active support of many friends, personal and political, but their combination was founded on agreement on principles with only intermittent concentration on particular objects.

Hamilton as a boy, in spite of his ambition and fertile contrivance, stood more in need of assistance than most. An illegitimate child, by the age of thirteen he was an orphan through the death of his mother and the desertion (if that is not too harsh a word), of his father. He was in a tiny insular community, St. Croix in the Leeward West Indies. He had no patrimony. His older brother, apprenticed to a carpenter, could offer no help, and later was an applicant for Alexander's aid. Unluckily, his mother's family, once wealthy, was breaking up and declining in fortunes at just the time the youngster could have profited by foster care.

Happily, three friends came to his rescue. The first was Nicholas Cruger, a merchant in Christiansted in whose store, or trading post, Alexander went to work. Cruger's absence from the island, on account of ill-health, placed Alexander in charge of the business for a span of months when he was seventeen. As proxy he discharged vexing responsibilities with such pains as impressed his employer with gratitude and confidence, and soon issued in a plan to send the promising clerk to the continent for education and larger opportunity. Another friend, Rev. Hugh Knox, made himself the special instrument in this project. Knox, long-time minister in a neighboring island, when he came to St. Croix quickly perceived the talent of the youth in Cruger's store, encouraged him to write for the local newspaper, and persuaded others to lend a hand in shaping Alexander's future. (Ann Lytton) Venton, Alexander's cousin, was one of his relatives who was able and glad to chip in; he was grateful to her all his life and sought to return her kindness. Since both Cruger and Knox came from the New York area and had there friends to whom

## The Historian

their protege could be commended, this became his destination and his permanent home.

Arrived on the continent (autumn, 1772?), Alexander immediately received the good offices of those to whom he brought letters. One was Hercules Mulligan, indirectly connected with Cruger's business. This enormous man became big brother to the slight young stranger, introduced him, and was ever solicitous, in practical kind ways, for Alexander's welfare. It was probably Mulligan who took him to William Livingston and Elias Boudinot at Elizabethtown, New Jersey, and these patrons entered him, for college preparation, in the academy of Francis Barber. The sponsorship and hospitality of these leaders, who were destined to play a yet larger part in the story of America, was of lasting consequence. Alexander was in close touch with Boudinot and Barber in army years, and Boudinot was his stout champion in Congress.

King's College widened Hamilton's circle of friends to include Robert Troup and Nicholas Fish, both his loyal companions through life. Troup was to be Hamilton's law tutor, and Hamilton made him executor of his will in 1795, though others were named later. Fish made the assault with Hamilton on the last redoubt at Yorktown and, years later, was Hamilton's second in a threatened encounter with Commodore Nicholson. Hamilton liked the president of the college, Myles Cooper, and protected him against a mob, though the two were political antagonists. Professor Robert Harpur coached Alexander in mathematics without demanding pay; this training doubtless contributed to the speed with which the pupil received the captaincy of the New York Artillery Company. Town as well as gown contributed to Hamilton's valuable acquaintance, for his first venture as patriot orator won him the approval of McDougall, Lamb, Willett, and others of the most active in the country's cause. Now, or earlier at Elizabethtown, Hamilton got to know William Duer, who

## Hamilton's Friends and Foes

was to be his first assistant in the Treasury, and John Jay with whom he had a more fruitful association.

After a year of field service in New York and New Jersey, Hamilton joined Washington's staff in the spring of 1777. Thereafter for four years he was in daily, almost hourly confidential relationship with the commander in chief in camp, march, and battle. When did a burdened leader have such a ready aide? Hamilton ran to meet responsibility, and yet knew how to make himself the faithful transmitter of his principal's wishes. These two, so unlike in age, station, and temperament, merged in mind and purpose to the point where it is difficult to distinguish them. They had only one tiff, quickly composed for the resumption of their constant collaboration. In the struggle for the Constitution and during the first five years of Washington's presidency the story of the one is almost the story of the other. Washington's administration could not have been so prosperous without Hamilton's planning in the Treasury, and Hamilton's increasingly independent career could not have succeeded without the powerful lever of Washington's approval. Strangely, Hamilton, with the warmer, more outgoing nature, had less affection for Washington than the older man was frank in showing to the younger. But this was of no public moment. To the last, when Hamilton had a major part in drafting Washington's Farewell Address, theirs was a partnership of thought and deed. They did not form a team in the ordinary sense of pooling talents for political management. Rather, their coincidence of sentiment formed a resource for each when needed.

Madison and Hamilton worked manfully together for two years, 1786-88, for the calling of the Philadelphia convention and the adoption of the Constitution. Later, when Jefferson returned from France and Madison, in Congress, opposed Hamilton's fiscal policies, the political union ceased and diverged ever farther. Whether the young nation profited more when Madison and Jefferson joined fortunes, or would have

## The Historian

been the gainer had Madison remained a Federalist is a question. Federalism, in the years when the country's solvency and stability were being established, was the loser by Madison's shift. Democracy, which was to require a longer span to come to maturity, benefited. Perhaps this was the superior blessing in the view of history, for Hamilton found other competent helpers, and Jefferson could not have had a guide, philosopher, and friend to equal his Virginia neighbor.

Another convention companion, who had kept the bridge with him at Poughkeepsie when acceptance of the Constitution by New York was in peril, deserted Hamilton. He was Robert R. Livingston, elegant, eloquent, and the chief of a powerful family. His alienation from Hamilton was an incident of New York politics, and, because local in origin, was especially regrettable. More prominent was the hostility between Hamilton and another New Yorker, George Clinton, who was regularly reelected governor. Here again, early cooperation turned to contest. When Hamilton, as aide to Washington, went to Albany to draw off troops from General Horatio Gates, the young officer met with every obstruction. Only Clinton recruited cash to press the reinforcements forward to Washington, and cared for Hamilton when he fell dangerously ill on the road. Hamilton, in return, recommended to the commander in chief to put General Clinton in the place of General Putnam who deranged Washington's plans. But later, Clinton's jealousy for the political independence of his state, in which his self-esteem was involved, made Hamilton, the nationalist, his persevering and outspoken foe.

However, Clinton's antagonistic influence up-state was partially offset by Hamilton's alliance, familial as well as political, with Philip Schuyler. Hamilton was as much Schuyler's son as son-in-law, for the affection and admiration which flowed between them was instant and unailing. Schuyler's contribution to Hamilton's program for America was of the original as well as the supporting kind. The strong oak tim-

## Hamilton's Friends and Foes

bers built into Hamilton's house in Harlem were from Schuyler's sawmills on the upper Hudson. This was symbolic of their mutual lives.

Before we get too far away from the war, others of Hamilton's companions in arms must be remembered. It is a pity that several of the chief of these died too early to extend their friendship into Hamilton's Treasury years and beyond. One was General Nathanael Greene, who may have introduced Hamilton to Washington's special notice. This greatest soldier who fought under Washington shared Hamilton's economic and political objects, and Hamilton had the sad duty of pronouncing the grateful eulogy on his too soon ended career. Another was Lord Stirling, first known by Hamilton in New Jersey days. Stirling protected Hamilton against the unworthy insinuations of Gates and the latter's unaccountable aide, James Wilkinson. John Laurens, gallant South Carolinian, Hamilton's copy in patriotism and idealism, was killed in a skirmish when the war was almost over. This severed a tie that would have meant much for the future, and the same may be said, in lesser degree, of the tragic death of Francis Barber, Alexander's teacher at Elizabethtown, when peace was about to be proclaimed.

More than fluency in the French language bound Hamilton to Lafayette. Their loyalty, enterprise, and esprit were alike, and the response of France to America's need in money and men owed much to the trusting exchanges of these two. Their private letters and the official records contain the testimony, which Lafayette, in long backward look, took pains to confirm. Other French officers, Rochambeau and Chastellux, as well as youngsters like Fleury and Gouvion and many more, stand in this company of Hamilton's friends of camp and military council. Hamilton's intimacy, military and civil, with the generous, buoyant, and able Baron von Steuben was peculiar. Hamilton was filial toward the amiably pompous Prussian and at the same time was his patron. The young aide at

## The Historian

headquarters smoothed the way for Steuben's remarkable usefulness as inspector-general, and later was his champion in appeals to Congress for reimbursement of financial losses in the service. Hamilton, when Secretary of the Treasury, was also the personal banker and really the guardian of the old veteran whose pocket was no sooner supplied than emptied by his open-handedness.

William Popham may be recalled in this fiduciary connection. As a young officer attached to the suite of Chastellux he was a guest at the Schuyler mansion at Albany during the honeymoon of Alexander and Elizabeth, was later Hamilton's brother at the bar of New York, and many years afterward help to secure Hamilton's military back pay for his widow. At the wedding, best man to the groom was Dr. James McHenry, Hamilton's fellow on Washington's staff. Their companionship, fostered by similar views and literary gifts, continued, and McHenry prescribed for Hamilton's physical ailments from overstrain of a constitution never strong.

In the Treasury, Hamilton's chief assistants, following Duer's brief tenure, were Oliver Wolcott, Jr. and Tench Coxe. Wolcott was described by Hamilton as "a good man of business," for his proven capacity in ordering the financial affairs of his own state of Connecticut was repeated and enlarged in his national assignments as auditor, comptroller, and afterward, Hamilton's successor. His competence, while unquestioned, was lacking in imagination, but he could not have been more ingenious in offices of loyalty toward Hamilton. At an unhappy crisis, when Hamilton determined to acknowledge a private lapse (the illicit affair with Mrs. Reynolds) in order to protect his public integrity, Wolcott was chosen to be present as first friend. Maybe too willingly Wolcott continued to accept Hamilton's leadership when his responsibility was rather to President John Adams. Wolcott was quick to visit Hamilton after the duel, did what he could to comfort him in his last hours, and helped provide for his family.



## Hamilton's Friends and Foes

Tench Coxe was an economist of pretensions approaching those of Hamilton; indeed, it may be that parts of the Treasury reports, notably that on manufactures, were the work of Coxe. As statistician and industrial historian he enjoys a place quite aside from his association with Hamilton. He was given to changing his allegiance, and Hamilton came to distrust and dislike him.

When Hamilton's fiscal proposals were laid before Congress beginning early in 1790, they became of course the chief objects of debate. The legislative controversies over funding and national bank flowed over into the newspapers and were echoed in the correspondence of every public man. Every jealousy and bias, every sectional political preference and preconception was focused on Hamilton's reasoning and recommendations. Madison early announced the opposition, with Jackson of Georgia more frequent and more lengthy if not so cogent. The pitch, though nobody quite said so at the time, was state against rising nation. Especially because Hamilton was not allowed to appear before Congress to explain and urge his policies, he required knowledgeable and stalwart spokesmen on the floor of the House. These he had in men as different as William Smith of South Carolina, his old patron Elias Boudinot of New Jersey, and Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts, among others. Smith was valuable particularly because he came from the leading state of the deep South, a region already restive under claims of the central government to authority. Smith spoke Hamilton's lines, almost literally, but that did not make him the worse expositor. Boudinot, established patriot, former president of the Continental Congress, and impressive lawyer, was his own master, but his views were at one with Hamilton's. Moreover, he had a pride in the finance minister who had been a youth in his home. Thus he defended Hamilton's policies not only with belief but with fatherly affection. Afterward Hamilton could return the compliment by nominating his friend for director of the mint, a

## The Historian

post which Boudinot found congenial and honorific. Theodore Sedgwick, successful lawyer of western Massachusetts, who helped put down Shays' rebellion, was prominent among Treasury supporters in Congress, and remained an unwavering helpmeet of Hamilton in Federalist struggles.

Among those specially qualified to give backing to Hamilton's fiscal program were Robert and Gouverneur Morris. Before he left Washington's staff, Hamilton had outlined to Robert Morris, who was about to become Superintendent of Finance, the plan of a national bank. Later, as collector of continental revenue for New York, Hamilton was Morris' subordinate. It may be that Morris proposed Hamilton for Secretary of the Treasury, to carry out a program which Morris was capable of devising had not such mammoth obstacles stood in his way during the period of war and Confederation. Gouverneur Morris, as member of the New York provincial legislature, was chairman of a committee which corresponded with Lt. Col. Hamilton at headquarters to be informed of military perils to the state, and the two continued sympathetic friends in innumerable exchanges. Gouverneur Morris might have been called "Mr. Federalist," so firm was he for central authority versus local autonomy. He pronounced Hamilton's funeral oration. Rufus King upheld Hamilton's measures in the Senate. Just Hamilton's age, he had many of the same qualities of handsome looks, oratorical skill, and effectiveness as legislator and executive. Their talents were combined to secure approval of the Jay Treaty, King writing some of the "Camillus" papers in defense of that agreement which the Republicans considered a humiliating surrender to British demands. Fisher Ames, the most gifted of Federalist orators, was in less intimate personal association with Hamilton, but was his constant party adherent and after Hamilton's death summed up his career in understanding appreciation.

Timothy Pickering, also of Massachusetts, was second to

## Hamilton's Friends and Foes

none as a Hamilton partisan. He was Hamilton's admirer from the first days of their service in Washington's military family, and in the battle of Germantown joined Hamilton in urging that the advance should not be delayed to subdue the British garrison in the Chew house. Their pleas were unavailing against the mistaken resolution of Gen. Henry Knox, who swayed Washington that foggy morning. Later, as Adams' cabinet minister, Pickering was Hamilton's man, and continued to elevate him even above Washington. Hamilton had an unbroken friendship with his brother-in-law, John Barker Church, purchasing agent for the French forces, afterward member of the House of Commons in his native England, and often Hamilton's client in legal matters. Church would doubtless have been Hamilton's second had a grave complaint against Monroe come to a duel. It appears that Church's pistols were used in the Hamilton-Burr "interview," though it was Nathaniel Pendleton who served as Hamilton's friend at Weehawken and helped row the dying man back to Bayard's house at Greenwich Village.

One so vigorous and convinced as Hamilton provoked more enemies than we have mentioned. Among members of Congress the loudest was William Branch Giles, who was set on by Jefferson to demand an investigation of Hamilton's conduct of the Treasury in 1793. This was one time, however, when a demagogue was worsted by factual response. Monroe's attack, as Hamilton believed, was of a meaner sort, the betrayal of a confidence. Monroe had professed himself fully convinced that the whisperings of a couple of miscreants, Reynolds and Clingman, grew out of Hamilton's liaison with their catspaw, Mrs. Reynolds, and in no way impeached Hamilton's conduct of the Treasury. Hamilton was sure that it was Monroe who later, to turn a political advantage, revived unfounded insinuations. Mrs. Hamilton despised Monroe to his dying day.

The running quarrel between Jefferson and Hamilton is

## The Historian

properly described as political. Beneath the harsh words that were used on both sides the two leaders had respect for each other, as, indeed, they were champions of complementary prescriptions for the American polity. America would be the poorer without the one or the other, counterpoised as their doctrines have been in our history. On the other hand, Hamilton's deep distrust of Aaron Burr was personal as well as political. He believed Burr to be an unprincipled rogue. He acted on this conviction at the cost of sacrificing Federalist hopes, for he threw his influence to Jefferson when the election of a president seemed balanced in the House of Representatives. Four years later, in a further proof of patriotism, he worked sedulously against Burr in the New York gubernatorial election, with the result that Morgan Lewis, the Republican candidate, won. This time Hamilton's damaging words were made the occasion of a challenge by the revengeful Burr. Under the code of that day, as Hamilton was reluctantly obliged to admit, Burr was within his rights. To preserve his character in the distorted view of the public, Hamilton acceded to the arbitrament of bullets. The toll was the heaviest ever paid in such an encounter on American soil.

Looking at Hamilton's political friends, the Federalists, as a group, they were stout fellows. It would be difficult to conceive of men of talents better fitted for the work they had to do — the establishment of the nation. Comparisons are ungracious and apt to be inaccurate. Certain of his confreres had particular qualities equal to Hamilton's. Gouverneur Morris and Fisher Ames were as articulate; Boudinot, Livingston, and King were as steadfast; John Marshall was as firm in applying a principle, and made himself, in interpretation of the Constitution, the projection of Hamilton. Others had the same courage, or gaiety, or affection. Hamilton was the acknowledged leader from a combination of merits — intellect, moral commitment, and an element of fervor that was unique. Ardor, spark, excitement, self-forgetful eagerness — call it

## Hamilton's Friends and Foes

what we may, this emotion was born in him and set him apart from the rest. To other ingredients he added a yeast which was his own. To all he touched he imparted a ferment.

The business of the Federalists was preparatory. That of nursing up democracy in America fell to other hands and was a more patient, more vexing task. Without the ways and means supplied by the Federalists, the promise of America could not have been realized. Responsibility of society must precede the rights of man, though the latter is the greater glory. It is enough that we should be grateful for both. Antagonists of a former day in the wisdom of time blend in our thankful heritage.