

ALEXANDER HAMILTON AT NEW BRIDGE



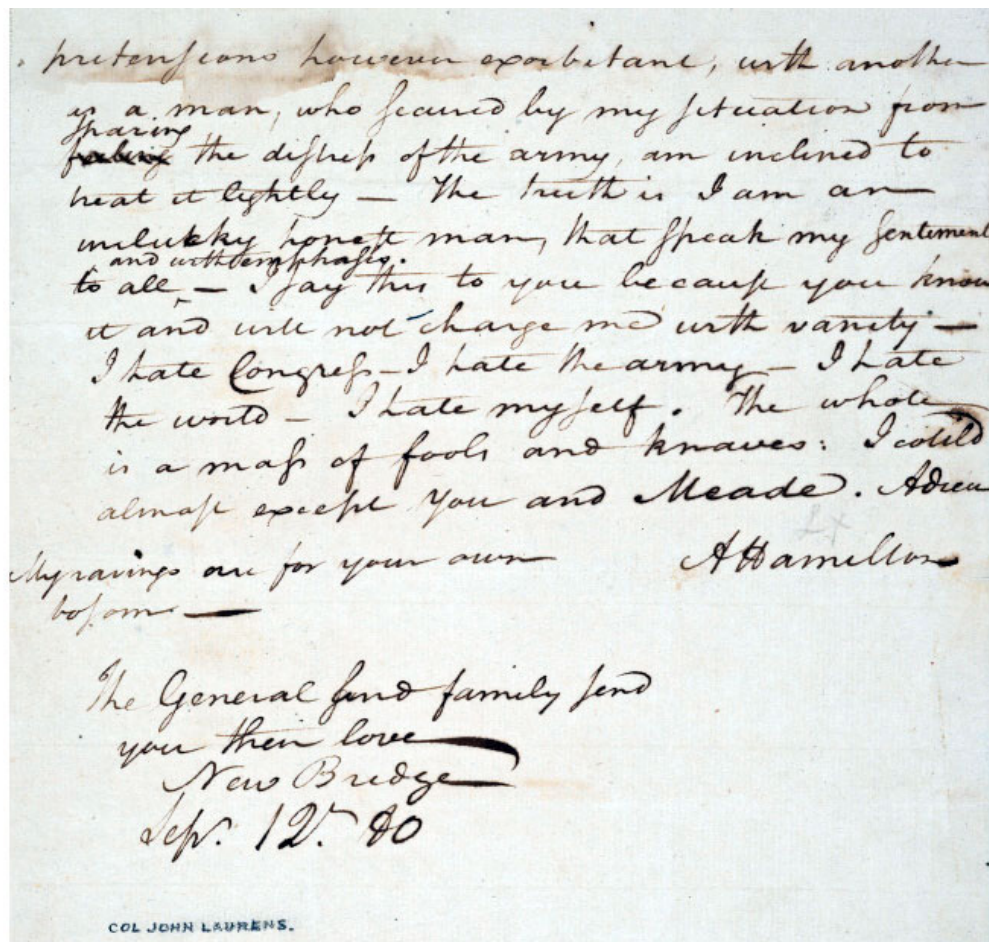
1790 Miniature of Hamilton attributed Charles Shirreff

Lin-Manuel Miranda's Broadway smash-hit musical *Hamilton*, based upon Ron Chernow's 2004 biography, has not only revived interest in this nation's first Treasury Secretary, Alexander Hamilton, but it perhaps also might be credited with preserving his portrait on the ten-dollar bill. In connection with Hamilton's topicality, this letter, addressed from him while he served on Washington's staff at New Bridge, offers insight into its writer's gloomy outlook on the war effort and his growing disdain for weak and indecisive government. It also highlights New Bridge's complex involvement in the American Revolution as a battleground, military headquarters and intelligence post, repeatedly occupied and contested by both armies.

In context, Washington's poorly fed Grand Army marched into Bergen County from Orangetown, New York, on August 23, 1780, encamping in a wide arc between the Hudson River at Fort Lee and Liberty Pole (Englewood). Four

brigades foraged as far south as Hoboken, Paulus Hook (Jersey City), and Bergen Point (Bayonne). On September 4, 1780, the Continental Army recrossed the Hackensack River at New Bridge and "encamped on a high Ridge of land in a place called Steenrapie [now River Edge, Oradell, Paramus and Emerson]." According to noted military historian, Todd Braisted, "there were approximately 14,000 infantry, artillery and cavalry at Steenrapie and environs."

For at least nine days during this period, General Washington established headquarters in the Zabriskie-Steuben House, issuing orders and correspondence from either "near New Bridge," or simply at "New Bridge." At a Council of War, held in the Zabriskie-Steuben House in River Edge on Sep-



New York Public Library, written by A Hamilton from New Bridge, Sep. 12, 1780 to Col John Laurens.

tember 6, 1780, Washington and a majority of his generals thought nothing could be done against the British army in New York City before the imminent arrival of the French navy and expeditionary force, due to British naval superiority. News of the arrival of the French fleet reached camp on September 15, 1780, whereupon General Washington, the Marquis de Lafayette and General Henry Knox departed for Hartford, Connecticut, to meet with Count de Rochambeau and Admiral de Jarnay. The army, left under the command of Major General Nathanael Greene, decamped from Steenrapie on September 20, 1780, returning to Orangetown, New York.

Alexander Hamilton, an artillery captain from New York City, was promoted to lieutenant colonel and appointed an aide-de-camp and secretary to General Washington in 1777. By the time this letter was written, Hamilton knew full well the precarious condition of the Continental army and already considered the Continental Congress, acting under the weak central authority imposed by the Articles of Confederation, to be ineffectual in its efforts to sustain its troops. This letter, written from the Zabriskie-Steu-ben House at Historic New Bridge Landing in River Edge, is addressed to Lt. Colonel John Laurens, who had also served in Washington's official "family" as an aide -de-camp (1777-79) with Hamilton, where they formed a very close friendship. At the time this letter was sent, Laurens was in Philadelphia on parole, having been captured in the fall of Charleston in May 1780. It recipient was killed two years later (in 1782) at the battle of the Combahee River in South Carolina on August 27, 1782, dying at 27 years of age.

Letter to [Lieutenant] Colonel John Laurens

We ought both my Dear Laurens to beg pardon of our friendship for mutual neglect in our correspondence, though I believe you are a good deal in arrears to me, and I am sure one of my letters might have miscarried— I informed you that the application, in favor of [Brigadier General Du] Portail [also captured at Charleston] and yourself, had been referred to a general exchange as respected.

When the general exchange will take place is precarious, but it may happen in two or three months. The enemy have offered to exchange all the officers and men on Long Island and in New York for an equivalent in our hands. They have above four hundred private men. The offer has been heretofore evaded in hope of offensive operations—four hundred men you in garrison would have been equal to twice their number out

of it—and might have made a critical

difference in the event. But un-

happily for us our prospects

of offensive operations, and

that of a genuine exchange

becomes probable in

proportion. Two months

will explain the business;

and I counsel you to defer

your plan; you then will

have time enough to execute

it against next Campaign or to

ruin yourself in a rash attempt.

If we are able to act offensively,

we shall do it on good grounds,

and you may look with certain-

ty for relief—if we are not able to do this, I believe

the enemy's offer will be accepted; and I think

there will be no difficulty in including you.

I am angry with you for having "taken the liber-ty" to introduce [Arnoldus] VanDerhorst and Mr.

[Richard Keith] Call. If you had simply intro-

duced them (without taking such a liberty with

me) I should have been obliged to you. They will

tell you however, that we have done all we could

to make their stay in Camp agreeable.

I have conveyed your reproof to the lads. They

have considered me as the Secretary of the family

and fancied me a partnership which did not ex-

ist—Writing or not writing to you, you know they

love you, and sympathize in all that concerns you.

Indeed my Laurens, I often realize your situation.

But play the Philosopher if you can, and improve

your captivation improving your mind. Tell me

not of the difficulty— I expect you will surmount

difficulties which would bear down other men



Hamilton by John Trumbull, 1806

with your sensibility and without your fortitude. I was told you were going to explore the caverns of the blue mountains in quest of knowledge—enterprises of this kind are worthy of you, not fruitless repinings at your fate.

I give you in a former letter my ideas of the situation of your country and the proper remedies to her disorders. You told me, my remedies were good, but you were afraid would not go down at this time. I tell you necessity must force them down. And that if they are not speedily taken the patient will die. She is in a galloping consumption and her case will soon become desperate. Indeed, my dear friend, to drop allegory, you can hardly conceive in how dreadful a situation we are. The army, in the course of the present month, has received only four or five day's rations of meal, and we really know not of any adequate relief in future. This distress at just a stage of the campaign sours the soldiery. 'Tis in vain you make apologies to them. The officers are out of humor, and the worst of evils seem stop be coming upon us. A loss of our virtue. 'Tis in vain you attempt to appease; you are almost detested as an accomplice with the administration. I am losing character, my friend, because I am not over complaisant to the spirit of clamor. So that I am in a fair way to

be out with everybody. With one set, I am considered as a friend to military pretensions, however exorbitant, with another as a man, who secured by my situation from having the distress of the army, am inclined to treat it lightly. The truth is I am an unlucky honest man that speaks my sentiments to all, and with emphasis. I say this to you because you know it and will not charge me with vanity—I hate Congress—I hate the army—I hate the world—I hate myself. The whole is a mass of fools and knaves: I could almost except you and Meade. Adieu.

A. Hamilton

My ravings are for your own bosom.

The General and family send you their love.

New Bridge

Sept. 12, 1780

Introduction and transcription by Kevin Wright

The New York Public Library Digital Collections

<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/b917eb3b-dec7-ad32-e040-e00a18060e3e#/?uuid=b917eb3b-decb-ad32-e040-e00a18060e3e>