A Love Letter from Alexander Hamilton to His “Nut-Brown Maid"

Richard Brookhiser

This letter from Alexander Hamilton to Elizabeth Schuyler, written October 6, 1780, reflects a courtship heading down its homestretch—author and recipient would be married in two months. They were a well-suited, yet asymmetrical pair. Elizabeth Schuyler, the “nut-brown maid,” was fortune’s favorite. She was the second-eldest daughter of Philip Schuyler, general, congressman, wealthy landowner. Elizabeth, also known as Eliza and Betsey, was a spirited girl, and the charitable work of her later life would show her to be principled and competent. Colonel Alexander Hamilton was in some respects even more favored—at the young age of 23, he was already showing that he was one of the most talented members of America’s greatest generation. George Washington, on whose staff he had worked since 1777, had spotted him as a comer. His looks, his manner and his uniform added charm and dash. His station in life, however, was much more problematic than his fiancé’s. Only a few years earlier, he had been an illegitimate orphan living in the West Indies. Everything he had achieved in his adopted American homeland had come by work, brilliance, and luck.

The letter, and their courtship, enacts an old American story—upward mobility, and assimilation by marriage. Though Hamilton speaks of a “secret wedding,” this was some passing whim. The Schuylers welcomed him as a son-in-law, and showered him with praise. To his place on the “family” of Washington’s staff, he would add a place in one of the United States’ first families.

The letter also offers an interesting sidelight on mores. The end of the second paragraph, without being at all obscene, is saturated with sex. It also implies that the young lovers have already enjoyed it. Many of Hamilton’s acquaintances and peers, from Martha Washington to John Adams, would comment on his libido. Miss Schuyler did not seem to mind it.

The last paragraph before the signature foreshadows future troubles. “Your business now,” Hamilton jokes, “is to study ‘the way to keep him’”—i.e., himself. Mrs. Hamilton would keep her husband till the premature end of his life, and keep his memory bright for the fifty years that she survived him. But Hamilton would stray—and his most grievous infidelity would be given spectacular publicity in a 1797 pamphlet in which, in order to refute a charge of corruption, Hamilton would admit to adultery and to paying blackmail. The ardent letter reprinted here and that astonishing pamphlet will both be on display in Alexander Hamilton: The Man Who Made Modern America, an exhibition at the New-York Historical Society (September 10, 2004 – February 28, 2005).

Public life intrudes in the postscript, as Hamilton promises an account of the flight of Benedict Arnold and the hanging of his British handler, Major John André, both of which he witnessed firsthand. The shared life of these two young people would be spent in the public arena.

Document: A letter from Col. Alexander Hamilton to Elizabeth Schuyler, written from the Continental Army’s headquarters in New Jersey, October 6, 1780. This letter and other important historical documents relating to Alexander Hamilton and the founding of the United States will be on display at the New-York Historical Society, September 10, 2004 – February 28, 2005. (From the Gilder Lehrman Collection, on deposit at The New-York Historical Society in New York City, GLC 773)


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Transcription of a letter from Alexander Hamilton to Elizabeth Schuyler, October 6, 1780

I have told you, and I told you truly that I love you too much. You engross my thoughts too entirely to allow me to think of any thing else. You not only employ my mind all day; but you intrude upon my sleep. I meet you in every dream—and when I wake I cannot close my eyes again for ruminating on your sweetmesses. 'Tis a pretty story indeed that I am to be thus monopolized, by a little nut-brown maid like you—and from a statesman and a soldier metamorphosed into a puny lover. I believe in my soul you are an enchantress; but I have tried in vain, if not to break, at least, to weaken the charms—you maintain your empire in spite of all my efforts—and after every new one, I make to withdraw myself from my allegiance my partial heart still returns and clings to you with increased attachment.

To drop figure my lovely girl you become dearer to me every moment. I am more and more unhappy and impatient under the hard necessity that keeps me from you, and yet the prospect lengths as I advance. Harrison has just received an account of the death of his father and will be obliged to go to Virginia. Meade’s affairs (as well as his love) compel him to go there also in a little time. There will then remain too few in the family to make it possible for me to leave it till Harrisons return—but I have told him that I will not be delayed beyond November. I had hoped the middle would have given us to each other; but I now fear it will be the latter end. Though the period of our reunion in reality approaches it seems further off. Among other causes of uneasiness, I dread lest you should imagine, I yield too easily to the bars, that keep us asunder; but if you have such an idea you ought to banish it and reproach yourself with injustice. A spirit entering into bliss, heaven opening upon all its faculties, cannot long more ardently for the enjoyment, than I do my darling Betsey, to taste the heaven that awaits me in your bosom. Is my language too strong? it is a feeble picture of my feeling;—no words can tell you how much I love and how much I long — you will only know it when wrapt in each others arms we give and take those delicious caresses which love inspires and marriage sanctifies.

Indeed my Dear Betsey you do not write to me often enough. I ought at least to hear from you by every post and your last letter is as old as the middle of Sept. I have written you twice since my return from Hartford.

You will laugh at me for consulting you about such a trifle; but I want to know, whether you would prefer receiving the nuptial benediction in my uniform or in a different habit. It will be just as you please; so consult your whim and what you think most consistent with propriety.

If you mean to follow our plan of being secretly married, the scruple ought to appear entirely your own and you should begin to give hints of it.

Tell my peggy I will shortly open a correspondence with her. I am composing a piece, of which, from the opinion I have of her qualifications, I shall endeavour to prevail upon her to act the principal character. The title is “the way to get him, for the benefit of all single ladies who desire to be married.” You will ask her, if she has any objection to taking a part in this piece; and tell her that, if I am not much mistaken in her, I am sure she will have none. For your own part, your business now is to study “the way to keep him”—which is said to be much the most difficult task of the two; though in your case I verily believe it will be an easy one, and that to succeed effectually you will only have to wish it sincerely. May I only be as successful in pleasing you, and may you be as happy as I shall ever wish to make you!

A. Hamilton

October 6th. 80

I promised you a particular account of André, I am writing one of the whole affair of which I will send you a copy—.
 Alexander Hamilton, oil painting by John Trumbull (1792).
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Portrait of Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton (Image Donated by Corbis-Bettmann.)