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A Spirit of Revolution: The Story of Lt. Colonel John Laurens

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Abstract: Though he has become a figure all but forgotten or merely glossed over, John Laurens (1754-1782) was the purest form of an early American hero, a pioneer for proto-abolitionism in the South, and a queer historical figure. His complex character and legacy is deserving of recognition and remembering. In this article, I intend to do just that by giving a brief historical summary of his life and person.

The heat is sticky, clinging to clean chins and neckties, to battered shirts and blue coats. The cicadas sing in the Pennsylvanian sun, and a new pair of boots take a step into the mud.

There was a fresh face in Washington's camp: handsome, passionate, and fresh off the boat from London, John Laurens was a young man beaming with the urge for freedom. Only 22, he now found himself at the Continental Army's encampment in Germantown on August 8th, 1777.¹ After much debate with his concerned father, Henry Laurens (now current President of the Continental Congress), John had secured a spot as a temporary aide-de-camp to General Washington himself. It would not be surprising if he was met with jealous glares and furrowed brows as he strutted up to the officers' headquarters, never having seen war nor trained in any such talents.² Who exactly did this idealistic rich boy think he was marching up to the Commander-in-Chief's inner circle? Whatever qualms may have risen would be forgotten, within little time Laurens would prove himself as a courageous, intelligent, and distinguished officer within the army. The Marquis de Lafayette would comment on his reckless bravery in the Battle of Brandywine and would commend Laurens on his valor the following month in the Battle of Germantown.³ Yet, John's claim to fame would stem from his fervent proto-abolitionism and his continuous fight to integrate black men into the army in exchange for their freedom. He was in many ways an embodiment of patriotic zeal and an almost naive believer in freedom.

¹ Gregory D. Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution: With a New Preface by the Author*, Book, Whole (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2015), 73.

² This is in direct reference to the aides Laurens would be closest with: Alexander Hamilton and the Marquis De Lafayette. Though there is no evidence supporting any specific reaction to Laurens' arrival and place within the army, in comparison to Hamilton who worked his way up the ladder, and Lafayette, who had been trained in military tactics and was a bridge between Washington and the French, John was merely a nobody with a father who was a somebody.

³ Lafayette Letters ; Lafayette to Henry Laurens, October 18, 1777, in *Lafayette in the Age of the American Revolution*, ed. Stanley J. Idzerda (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1977), 124.

⁴ From George Washington to William Gordon, March 8, 1785.

Though John's military career would be short, his impact on his "family" within the army as well as the American Revolution itself was irrefutable. "No man possessed more of the amor patriae," Washington would later use to describe him, "he had not a fault that I ever could discover, unless intrepidity bordering upon rashness, could come under that denomination; & to this, he was excited by the purest motives."⁴ Though he has become a figure all but forgotten or merely glossed over, Laurens was the purest form of an early American hero, a pioneer for proto-abolitionism in the South, and a queer historical figure; in consequence, his complex character and legacy is deserving of recognition and remembering.

In this paper, I intend to retell Laurens' story and combat previous concepts of historiography regarding his legacy. I will mainly draw upon and argue against the only major biography on Laurens, written by Gregory D. Massey in 2015. Using a variety of primary sources, mostly letters, and first-hand accounts, I intend on understanding John Laurens as a more complete character and as a queer man. While Massey and other past historians fail to recognize any homosexual undertones (or in turn, believe them), I argue that the presence of them is not only evidence but is important in and of itself. While the title and concept of sexuality is a modern invention, same-sex attraction is a natural part of human life, existence, and love. If we allow ourselves as historians to understand love in the past as undefined and nonbinary, we may better understand characters like Laurens. With this open concept of love and attraction in mind, I will use it to further understand his passions, choices, and person. John was a man fueled by his emotions, honor, and boyish wish to change the world, a true spirit of revolution and a man of heart. This is his story.

I. Early Life

Henry Laurens was the richest man in the American colonies. He and his bride sat comfortably upon 20,000 acres of land, a plantation the size of a small kingdom populated with the Master, Mistress, and 227 slaves.⁴ Though Henry would later question the morality of his trade, there was far too much blood on his hands to repent.

John Laurens was born on October 28, 1754. After a series of miscarriages and stillborns, Eleanor and Henry Laurens were relieved to finally be gifted with a second son. Soon after came little Eleanor in 1755, and before the birth of the fourth child, the eldest, Henry, died in 1758. John assumed the role of eldest, and the following year his second sister, Martha, was born. The Laurens family would continue to change, little Eleanor passed away at age 12 in 1764, while Henry Jr. (Harry) was born in 1763, followed by James (mostly referred to as “Jemmy”) in 1765. Finally, in 1770 Mrs. Laurens died during the birth of the youngest child, Mary Eleanor (“Polly”) Laurens.⁵ Simply said, by age 15, John was no stranger to loss.

This sets up a very particular situation for John, one that will in many ways shape his late teenage years and adulthood. With the passing of his mother, John was the next authority figure in the household after his father. He, especially in later years, served as a “surrogate father” to his younger siblings. The fragility of life was also made extremely clear to him, and most prevalently to his father. Throughout the rest of John’s life, Henry would play the overbearing and overcautious father.

On top of this sense of responsibility, he also grew up in a very particular world. He would be raised while the horrors of slavery were right at his doorstep. He would see the

⁴ Jack N. Rakove, *Revolutionaries: A New History of the Invention of America*, Book, Whole (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010), 204-207.

⁵ Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 9-11; 21-22.

hundreds of enslaved black men and women his father owned, see the back-breaking labor they would do, and the brutality they went through. He was to inherit this one day, but John had no interest in such.

In September of 1771, John and his brothers were sent to Europe to pursue higher education. Henry, cautious of the tensions growing between the crown and the colonies whisked his sons off to Geneva for their studies, putting them under the care of Jean Antoine Chais.⁶ Here, his sons were able to receive better schooling than in the Americas, while also remaining “safe” from the hostilities that were arising back home. He wished for neutrality, avidly reassuring John to focus on finishing his studies.⁷ The unconventionality of this situation shouldn’t be overlooked, few Americans were regarded worthy of mingling with European gentlemen, much less able to study abroad underneath such tutors.

As Europe moved away from the concepts of slavery, John learned anti-slavery ideology, such that would never be muttered back in South Carolina. Geneva was a land free from the “internal enemy” of slavery, and truly allowed John the ability to push against the institution he’d grown up alongside. Who is to say how, exactly, these ideas came to resonate with the eldest son of North America’s most infamous slave trader? Perhaps the crack of the whip would echo in John’s ears, maybe he would remember the times he saw men falling over in exhaustion, the cries of mothers as their sons were taken away. European elites could exhaust the reasons proving the immorality of slavery, but John had actually seen it. There is no way to know exactly what brought along this anti-slavery fascination, and Massey, in turn, doesn’t suggest any reason

⁶ Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 29

⁷ Henry Laurens, Philip M. Hamer, and South Carolina Historical Society, *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 1st ed., vol. 9, Book, Whole (Columbia: Published for the South Carolina Historical Society by the University of South Carolina Press, 1968). See letters regarding J.Laurens from 1773-1774.

other than John's desire to make something of a hero out of himself.⁸ With little record of the impact of slavery on Laurens' childhood, and few remaining documents regarding why Laurens chose such a path, the answer is left up to speculation. Whatever the reason, there was still a fire lit inside Laurens' belly.

Francis Kinloch arrived in Geneva in early 1774, a fellow South Carolinian and a graduate of Eton College, he and John would immediately become attached at the hip. Charismatic, handsome, and intelligent, John had no qualms with making friends beforehand, but Kinloch was special. Francis was just as charming and quick-witted as Laurens, and a companion who was unafraid to wrestle with John on political arguments and literature. They had found their equals in each other and held one another in the highest confidence. The two were inseparable, the liking they took to one another was an affection John had never expressed to any non-family member previously. Though some may convince themselves that their relationship was merely that of friends, more evidence points towards a deeper, romantic relationship between the two.

When it comes to understanding same-sex relationships in the 18th century, they must be viewed in a manner that is different from modern ideas of sexuality or romance. Sexuality as a concept- heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, etc. - was not yet conceived by this time. As Massey argues, the notions of what may be considered homosexual in the modern mind would not be so in the past.⁹ Yet at the same time, this exact reasoning applies to any connotations of what we define as "heterosexuality"; why do affectionate words exchanged between the opposite sexes insinuate flirting or romance, while the same language used between

⁸ Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 30-34.

⁹ Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 81.

the same sex is merely platonic? The hypocrisy of such a mindset is baffling, especially considering the commonality of same-sex relationships. and we must break apart the idea that attraction to the opposite sex is a default. This inability to see texts from outside a heteronormative viewpoint is many great historians' weaknesses.

John Laurens had never shown any interest towards women, despite Massey's evidence-less interjections regarding such.¹⁰ While there could arguably have been girls who had flirted or entertained feelings for John, there is no record of him exercising it back. Instead, Laurens had chosen to surround himself with other men and his greatest bonds were with that of the same sex.¹¹ While language between friends may seem overly affectionate to those of the modern day, this is not a viable excuse to disregard any deeper emotions that may lie beyond this familiar tone. Excusing all affectionate language to "that's just how it was back then" is a poor means of disregarding any non-heteronormative discussion and possible narratives. Furthermore, historians end up forgetting that history is not an art of "straight until proven gay", but rather something that is proved by evidence weighted against evidence.

Along with John's habitual preference to surround himself with men, the affections within the Laurens-Kinloch letters would also provide a basis for understanding their relationship. Most notably, the tone difference between Laurens' writings to others versus those to Kinloch was drastically different. As someone so infamous for his hurried and short letters, it would seem John was never at a loss for words when writing to Kinloch. Even after he had

¹⁰ Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 40. Massey tends to add "women" in many cases alongside his notes of John's frequent interaction and preferred company with men. For example: "John never had difficulty attracting women and men"; "Women played important roles in his life, but he reserved his primary emotional commitments for other men". At times, he forces the inclusion of women into the narrative, and provides little or none to elaborate on any women who were important to his life.

¹¹ Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 40. Massey even agrees, writing that "he continually centered his life around homosocial attachments to other men". Furthermore, Laurens throughout his lifetime shows no interest in the opposite sex, the letters that remain and the events of his lifetime have him only writing and confiding affectionately in other men.

begged his father to allow him to stay in Geneva, to which Henry refused, John would write to his dear Kinloch with eagerness to return to his side.¹² The two shared a fondness in political discourse, and would often debate the morality of the war stirring back home. While John burned with passion for the revolution, Kinloch remained far more reserved about the idea of separation. Yet despite the vastly different opinions they shared, the affections they held remained steadfast, as John would note:

“You and I may differ my Dear Kinloch in our political Sentiments but I shall always love you from the Knowledge I have of your Heart.”¹³

Though letters and records have all but been lost or never written down, what does remain known about the Kinloch-Laurens relationship is the clear homoerotic undertones of their narrative. These same trends and tones would be repeated in Laurens's later romantic relationships.

We will never know the true nature of John's affections or what his sexuality was- though he is more likely queer than not- nor is it a defining factor of his character. Yet it is still part of his story, part of his person, and should not be forgotten or left out of his narrative.

By 1775, John and his brothers had been safely enrolled in institutions in London, as well as placed in the care of/acquainted with Henry's English family and friends. John had now finally taken up the study of law as well as the full responsibility as the “man” (to quote Henry directly) of the household now that Henry Laurens had returned to South Carolina.¹⁴ By then, the Laurens brothers would find themselves often in the company of the Manning family, William Manning serving as a guardian and advisor of sorts to John.

¹² John Laurens to Francis Kinloch, August 23, 1774, Charleston Museum Collection of Revolutionary War Letters, Lowcountry Digital Library, The Charleston Museum Archives. <https://lcdl.library.cofc.edu/lcdl/catalog/lcdl:64131>.

¹³ John Laurens to Francis Kinloch, April 12, 1776.

¹⁴ Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 46. Ch3, fn 1.

Yet in September, disaster struck. John went off to arrange schooling options for little Jemmy, only to be met upon his return by Mr. Manning's clerk, caught in a fit of panic.¹⁵ Jemmy had fallen, cracking open his skull in an attempt to climb up to John's window. Panicked, John rushed to his brother's bedside and stayed with him there until his death on the 5th. Jemmy's death had shaken John in a manner not seen before, and the guilt of which weighed on Laurens for the rest of his own life. John was a mess, and only after a few weeks was he able to write to his father:

"I could only answer with my tears, that day and night the succeeding day, and 'till his death the succeeding night, I was constantly with him... The last night convulsions so gentle as scarce to be perceived; or pass under that name_ came on and lasted 'till he expired. I will not increase your Regret, as is usual upon these occasions by making the panegyrick of the dead... Let me conjure you then my Dear Father, not to abandon yourself to Grief as if all your Hopes were buried here_ Suffer not one moment to be spent in useless moans for the Dead, which might be employed to the Service of the Living. You have great and important Duties to perform upon the Earth, your family, your country looks to you with Confidence. Some tears must fall, would heaven that I could receive them in my bosom. Your Friends will be uneasy_ Your Country will want a Support when in most need of one_ and the most unhappy of Sons will be your truly affectionate and Dutiful... John Laurens."¹⁶

The story and tone of this letter are nothing short of heartbreaking, and John's attempts to console his father while he, himself, is mourning is all too hard to bear. Despite his acquaintance with death, we can't forget that John was only a young man at this time, barely 21 years of age. Not to mention, John had practically raised Jemmy. He had been given great household responsibilities since he was young, and the weight of his brother's death (which he attributed to his own negligence) was a blow that crushed his heart and spat on his pride. He had failed his father who he had always strived to impress.

¹⁵ John Laurens to Henry Laurens, October 4, 1775, in Henry Laurens, *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, 1st ed., vol. 10, 451-454. In the footnotes, it is believed John sent multiple letters, starting the 9th of September.

¹⁶ John Laurens to Henry Laurens, October 4, 1775, in *The Papers of Henry Laurens*, vol 10, 451-454.

After Jemmy had passed, in an odd way, Laurens became far more reckless than he had been before. Certainly, not having the responsibility of taking care of his young brother anymore may have enabled such behavior, and Harry was already secured in safe hands, but John's passions now turned from a flame to a wildfire.

All the while, John and Francis never failed to write to one another. As the American Revolution began to brew back home, the two were enthralled in debates regarding the prospects of monarchism and republicanism. While John became a fervent advocate for the patriots and republicanism, Francis was far more timid and his sentiments ultimately were loyalist in nature. Though these sentiments had been discussed between the two before in their time in Geneva, by April of 1776, the wedge had grown too wide for agreement.¹⁷ Most notably, it was during this time that John actually expressed his anti-slavery views and made note of the hypocrisy of his hometown:

“I think we Americans at least in the Southern Colonies, cannot contend with a good Grace, for Liberty, until we shall have enfranchised our Slaves_ how can we whose Jealousy has been alarm'd more at the Name of Oppression sometimes than at the Reality, reconcile to our Spirited Assertions of the Rights of Mankind, the galling abject of Slavery of our Negroes.”¹⁸

This was huge. It is without a doubt that others were thinking the same thing, but to be penned by the very son (arguably the favorite) of Henry Laurens? The weight it held was, for lack of better terminology, revolutionary. Those who knew John may not have found much surprise in his opinions regarding slavery, but as historians, here we see the gears taking motion.

Kinloch's response two weeks later was another turning point for John. It is in many ways the young man's first “breakup”, for it is the main catalyst for the falling out between the

¹⁷ John Laurens to Francis Kinloch, April 12, 1776.

¹⁸ John Laurens to Francis Kinloch, April 12, 1776.

two. At first, the sentiments are gentle, Francis assures that Laurens can be open in his opinions with him, for “we hold too fast by one another’s hearts, my dear Laurens, to be afraid of exposing our several opinions to each other”.¹⁹ Shortly after, however, Kinloch goes on to list the many reasons he finds John’s suggestion for independence absolutely ridiculous. What is most jarring, however, is that despite Laurens’ faith in his “humanity and love of justice”, Kinloch writes:

“For my part though I would rather not exist than be the slave of a despot, yet is the height of my wishes to live the subject of a monarch_ In a democracy you are condemned to a hateful mediocrity, and the desire of excelling in any respect, though perhaps not really so is always looked upon as shocking the spirit of the constitution._ to be confounded in a heap of butchers, bakers, blacksmiths etc., is dreadful for a man of any education, or feeling...”²⁰

While it’s unsurprising that a man of Kinloch’s wealth and status would have relatively negative views on working-class people, this clearly rubbed John the wrong way, as he professes in his response. John had just told him his intentions to free not just his white brethren but his black brethren as well, it would be absurd to believe Laurens would go along with Kinloch’s insults. Meanwhile, his inability to sense any of the King’s wrongdoings to the American people was yet another jab at John’s passions. The close-minded and rude sentiments Francis expressed were not something Laurens would take lightly.

To make matters even worse, Kinloch closes the letter off by stating “Be certain that I never shall forget you”.²¹ The undertones of this line *sting*. He may as well have told him “goodbye” after he brutally insulted his ideas in the most ignorant of manners. John was furious.

So furious, in fact, that Laurens would not respond until June. And when he did respond, every ounce of anger and discontent translated itself onto the parchment. John skips the

¹⁹ Francis Kinloch to John Laurens, April 28, 1776.

²⁰ Francis Kinloch to John Laurens, April 28, 1776.

²¹ Francis Kinloch to John Laurens, April 28, 1776.

pleasantries, simply starting with: “My ambition, Kinloch, is to live under a Republican government”. No “dear”, no “Francis”, but a letter that starts simply with “*my* ambitions”. Following that, Laurens goes line through line of Kinloch’s previous letter absolutely tearing it apart. The pure, unbridled, fury expressed throughout the letter encapsulates John’s sincerity in revolution and his clear change in affection for Kinloch. He tops it all off with the line: “To your unfinished sentence I will add, the Hands of a King ought to be tied_ that he may do no Mischief_ but a better way would be to have no King at all”, it’s safe to say, the quote speaks for itself.²² Then, John signs his name, and never writes to Kinloch again.²³

Around the time the heated debates were going on between Laurens and Kinloch, John had found himself in a predicament. Almost out of nowhere, he had gotten the daughter of William Manning, Martha, pregnant. No records of the two sharing any interest in one another remain, and the timing of his daughter’s birth roughly nine months after his argument with his “dear friend” is quite curious. Either way, the events that unfolded were quite a shock. Feeling a sense of guilt and duty to the poor girl, Laurens decides to marry her and they elope in October of 1776. He expresses these sentiments regarding his new wife, to his Uncle James:

I should inform you of an important change in my circumstances. Pity has obliged me to marry but a consideration of the duty which I owe to my country made me choose a clandestine celebration, lest the father should insist upon my stay in this country as a condition of the marriage the matter has proceeded too far to be longer concealed, and I have this morning disclosed the affair to Mr. Manning in plain terms reserving to myself the right of fulfilling the more important engagements to my country. It may be convenient on some accounts that the matter should be kept secret till you hear next from me, & you will oblige me by keeping it so.²⁴

²² John Laurens to Francis Kinloch, June 16, 1776.

²³ At least, he doesn’t for a while. In actuality, they correspond again later, and actually run in to each other during the war. By then, Kinloch has had a change of heart and is enlisted in the Continental Army.

²⁴ John Laurens to James Laurens, in Gregory D. Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 68.

Martha was an accident, a mistake made in a fit of rage or rebound, or by the coaxing of William Manning. Even Massey, suggests the latter as a possibility, and though I doubt Laurens actually wished to engage in flirtations with her, he probably felt an obligation to go along with the status quo. It's clear, here, that Laurens' sense of duty and honor proceeds any romance or affections he may hold. Men were expected to marry and have children as proof of masculinity, and perhaps this circumstance was better than any other Henry may force upon him later.²⁵ It's undeniable that John's true love was never with Martha, but with his home country. He would do anything to fight for the revolution, and it wasn't long until he managed to abandon his new wife and unborn child. Though a passionate soldier and a dedicated patriot, Laurens was a horrible husband and an even worse father.

Almost six years after he had first left his home, the eager young man arrived in Charleston in April 1777. Beaming with enthusiasm, he was ready to be the great hero he had always dreamed of. Everyone was going to know his name.

II. Alexander Hamilton and the Fall of 1777

The Battle of Brandywine was Laurens' first time on the battlefield, yet he fought with such vigor that one would have thought him used to the horrors of war. In the words of the Marquis De Lafayette, "It was not his fault he was not killed or wounded. He did everything that was necessary to procure one or t'other".²⁶ And in many ways, that was a sufficient embodiment of Laurens' spirit: his recklessness and bravery was both his Achilles' heel and greatest strength.

A few months later, in the Battle of Germantown, Laurens' reckless behavior would earn him a spot as one of the main figures in the attack. On October 4th, after only an hour of

²⁵ Ava Chamberlain, ed. Thomas A. Foster, *The New England Quarterly* 80, no. 2 (2007): 348–50.

²⁶ Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 75.

fighting, the rebel army was forced to a stalemate having discovered a band of over 100 redcoats shut up in and firing out of the Benjamin Chew house. In controlling the large stone building, the British had effectively found a means of shooting down the rebels, giving the Americans little to work with. The opportunity for surrender was shot down (literally; the man holding the white flag was fatally wounded) and drastic measures had to be taken. So, the Chevalier Du Plessis proposed a plan: he and an already wounded Laurens were to smoke the enemy out, and set the front door of the house ablaze.²⁷ Though matters didn't go quite as planned, both exercised valor and a willingness to take necessary risks in the pursuit of liberty. John Laurens' potential was easily recognizable, and with it, he turned heads.

The most important eyes he caught were of a man just as fiery, bold, ambitious, and reckless as himself. Though he had come from anything but John's circumstances, Alexander Hamilton would make himself one of the most important people in Laurens' life. The two shared a bond that not only rivaled the one John had shared with Kinloch but far surpassed it.

Just like any same-sex duo in the 18th century, the relationship between Hamilton and Laurens has been long debated. As early as 1976, historian Jonathan Katz presented the Hamilton-Laurens letters as examples of homosexuality in American history.²⁸ Though historians still struggle to come to an agreement, the statement of a romantic relationship between the two is not unheard of. Taking the speculations of Laurens having already been in a homosexual relationship in the past, as well as Hamilton's infamously flirtatious personality: the likelihood along with the evidence is quite incriminating.

²⁷ Massey, *John Laurens and the American Revolution*, 76-77.

²⁸ Jonathan Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A. : A Documentary*, 1st Harper colophon, Book, Whole (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).

Perhaps the reason some historians cannot see their relationship as anything more than platonic has to do with Hamilton's reputation as a womanizer. Yet, I find that a weak excuse. Quick-witted, sharp-tongued, and quite the romantic, if anything Hamilton's personality makes him seem more inclined to flirt with anyone, including men. Granted, John wasn't just any man, but that's precisely why his interest may have been piqued. Besides, according to one of Hamilton's major biographers, Ron Chernow, Hamilton would have not been a stranger to homosexuality, having grown up in St. Croix.²⁹ Many "sodomites" as they had been labeled, had been exiled to his homeland and he had grown up in a backwater town where rules regarding such were far freer than in the American colonies.

Once more, the kinship between the two aides-de-camp was uncanny. They both shared a fervent dedication to the revolution, as well as a strong desire for justice. Handsome, intelligent, and of similar minds: they gravitated to one another and were inseparable. They would become quite the power duo, both incredibly influential in Washington's circle as well as the revolution itself. The bond they shared as well as the men themselves were already unordinary, their story should not be treated as any less so.

While John Laurens didn't write enough, Alexander Hamilton wrote far too much. In this plethora of love letters, we're able to see through words, Hamilton's true affection for Laurens. Though this was undoubtedly a time of tender friendships and flowery language, the strength of the emotions shown in Hamilton's writing makes it difficult for even contemporaries not to speculate something more. In fact, Alexander's son, John Hamilton, after his father's death in 1804, would find the box in which Hamilton neatly kept these letters for decades. Not only in shock at the survival of the letters and contents of the box, but upon reading them, John

²⁹ Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton*, (Penguin Press 2004), 94-95.

Hamilton reportedly crossed out lines and actively censored phrases in fear of them harming his father's legacy.³⁰ In an omitted page from his biography on his father, he writes: "In the intercourse of these martial youths, who have been styled 'the Knights of the Revolution,' there was a deep fondness of friendship, which approached the tenderness of *feminine attachment*."³¹ The romantic undertones (if they can even be referred to as "undertones") are clearly not a modern viewer's mistake, but one that even then can be mistaken for "feminine attachment" or romantic heterosexual love. Therefore, any arguments regarding the commonality of such affectionate phrases become nearly void, for the words shared between the two officers were loving beyond the normality of the time.

The most famous and blatant example of such tenderness can be seen in a letter dated April 1779, in which Hamilton writes:

Cold in my professions, warm in my Friendships, I wish, my dear Laurens, it might be in my power, by action rather than words, to convince you that I love you. I shall only tell you that 'till you bade us Adieu, I hardly knew the value you had taught my heart to set upon you. Indeed, my friend, it was not well done. You know the opinion I entertain of mankind, and how much it is my desire to preserve myself free from particular attachments, and to keep my happiness independent on the caprice of others. You should not have taken advantage of my sensibility to steal into my affections without my consent. But as you have done it and as we are generally indulgent to those we love, I shall not scruple to pardon the fraud you have committed, on condition that for my sake, if not for your own, you will always continue to merit the partiality, which you have so artfully instilled into me.³²

Historians struggle to take the language at anything but face value, but the evidence is too glaring to overlook. Even if the phrase "I love you" was regarded as brotherly, the inclination to prove via actions rather than words makes the reasoning more difficult. In essence, "by actions"

³⁰ Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton*, 95.

³¹ Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton*, 95, fn. 47.

³² Alexander Hamilton to John Laurens, April 1779 in Alexander Hamilton, Harold C. Syrett, and Jacob Ernest Cooke, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 11, Book, Whole (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 34-38.

directly refers to his longing to see Laurens in person once more, however, what does showing love entail at this time? In the case of brotherly love, I assume it could be interpreted as being in his company or supporting him in work matters. That much is known, but it doesn't make it inherently platonic. Can that not be done in words? In the case of romantic love, however, the desire to convince him through action adds a layer of this being a blatant innuendo to physical affection. While Hamilton can reassure Laurens over and over of his fondness, only actions seem to be the most sufficient and endearing. Furthermore, what also catches the eye, is Hamilton's admitted distrust of others, and Laurens' ability to steal past these barriers. This allows us not only an insight into Hamilton's personality with others, but the intensity of the bond they shared, so much so Laurens was able to affect his happiness and do so "without my [Hamilton's] *consent*". Finally, and most recurring throughout the letter and their relationship, is Hamilton's struggle to *convince* Laurens of his affection. This, in turn, suggests a side of John that didn't truly know where Hamilton stood in their relationship or refuses to fully accept it. Now, if there was a disinterest, Laurens would not have replied in affection nor would such sentiments carry for so long. However, what is most likely is the fact Laurens felt either undeserving or insecure of Hamilton's love. In a latter portion of the letter, Hamilton sarcastically asks John to "find him a wife" before he admits he actually has no interest in marriage. (He also requests Laurens give an accurate description of his "*size*" and "length of his nose" to which he "never spared him of pictures".³³) This, also, is prompted by Hamilton finding out about John's wife and daughter, whom Laurens had reportedly never told him about prior. Nevertheless, the topic of marriage

³³ Alexander Hamilton to John Laurens, April 1779. The last quotation is actually speculated, for John C. Hamilton crossed out the phrase following "mind you do justice to the length of my nose and don't forget, that I <- ->". Upon closer inspection to the document itself using technologies, some historians and individual scholars assume the last five words of the sentence to say "never spared you of pictures". This is not confirmed, but arguments given are convincing and images of said letter are provided.

became a frequent matter in the rest of their letters, but never in too enthusiastic a means. In one such instance, Hamilton would later write, "... I have still a part for the public and another for you; so your impatience to have me married is misplaced; a strange cure by the way, as if after matrimony I was to be less devoted [to you] than I am now."³⁴ This phrase suggests that John had been encouraging his "dear boy" (a term he had used to address Hamilton) towards matrimony, not out of disgust but as a *strange cure*. It is here where many begin to see Laurens as a self-loathing homosexual, and while it bears some fruit, it is hard to say if John genuinely disliked himself for it. Nevertheless, Laurens held this idea that marriage was a social necessity, and had hoped to save Hamilton from loving him, instead. Again, this was not uncommon for homosexual men at the time, at it places Laurens amongst a common belief: duty before attraction. This also relates back to his own marriage, proving there was no love between the Laurenses other than a social necessity. Perhaps John's attitude stemmed from a place of regret, he probably believed he didn't deserve any affection from Hamilton, especially after how poorly things went with Kinloch. And, while Laurens was so ingrained in societal responsibilities and honor due to his background, Hamilton had been used to a world that had not been so strict, and thus was less inclined to conform. Simply said, he probably had less of a problem with it than Laurens.

Interpretations can be made and speculated and never known, but Hamilton was not frivolous with his wording. He chose his words wisely or at least wrote from the heart. It feels foolish to explain or prove the tenderness in his words, considering how blatantly affectionate they were. With respect to other interpretations, I am hesitant and meticulous in proving all

³⁴ Alexander Hamilton to John Laurens, September 16, 1780.

³⁶ Jack Rakove, *Revolutionaries*, 221.

possibilities of said argument, but in fact, there is no denying the romantic bond between Laurens and Hamilton.

III. Valley Forge and the Duel

Winter quarters at Valley Forge allowed for an extended time off the battlefield. However, it was anything but relaxing and the horrors of the Continental Army's shape allowed John and others to contemplate the war effort. While others were dismayed, Laurens looked towards a solution. So, unable to pick up the sword, Laurens turned to the pen. Here, in the midst of starvation, sickness, and ragged conditions, Laurens would write his radical proposal "to augment the Continental forces from an untried Source."³⁶ In 1775, Lord Dunmore had tried to rattle Southern plantation owners by promising black slaves freedom if they enlisted in the British Army. Now, John would do the same. Just as he, himself, had found freedom in revolution, he hoped his black brethren could do the same. This would be his life's work and truest passion, and with little time he was calculating benefits to the American cause as well as the abolitionist one.

Now, black soldiers were already a part of the Continental Army, mostly freedmen from the North. However, John was committed to bringing this sentiment down to his homeland in the South, but what planter would agree to it? His means of convincing them were simple, he would lead by example while those who agreed would be reimbursed by Congress for their enslaved. That same winter, John wrote to his father asking for his inheritance early and in the form of "able-bodied men slaves" instead of "leaving me a fortune".³⁵ His boldness was admirable, and

³⁵ John Laurens to Henry Laurens, January 14th, 1778, in William Simms and John Laurens, *The Army Correspondence of Colonel John Laurens in the Years 1777-8, Now First Printed From Original Letters to His Father, Henry Laurens, President of Congress, Sabin Americana 1500-1926*, Book, Whole (New York: n.p, 1867).

³⁸ Rakove, *Revolutionaries*, 223. ³⁹ Rakove, *Revolutionaries*, 226.

though Henry as well as Washington didn't believe his plan would grow to fruition, Laurens took his father's hesitation as a challenge.

Father and son would write to one another in earnest, both combatting the other in their opinions regarding John's proposal, slavery as an institution, as well as the very people themselves. While Henry put the blame of slavery back on the shoulders of the British, and only feared for his own salvation, John was adamant in arguing for the humanity of those enslaved. While others blamed race for African slaves' intellect, position, etc., Laurens argued that they were "a trampled people" who were "debased by Servitude" and forced into "perpetual humiliation". In his usual revolutionary mindset, race made and played no factor in John's idea of freedom for each enslaved person "has so much human left in them, as to be capable of aspiring to the rights of men".³⁸ To John's credit, these thoughts were beyond most of his countrymen, and though his passion bordered on naivety, his point was just. Henry would attribute this all to his son's inexperience and age, pushing it aside as an "eccentric scheme" while also questioning if John had even "consulted your [his] General" on the matter.

Meanwhile, while John put together his plan, he and the rest of Washington's staff were still busy with other matters. After a variety of humiliating defeats during the Philadelphia Campaign, Washington's reputation was suffering. The army was in horrible shape, and he had yet to get another win. Congress was concerned. At the same time, General Horatio Gates as well as Benedict Arnold had led troops to victory up north in Saratoga. Rumors would spread, and the Commander-in-Chief faced ridicule from Congress and mutiny from within. As people sang Gates' victory, they only heightened the images of Washington's defeats. Gates' ego would only be bloated, and soon disrespect for the commander was whispered amongst his own generals. This so-called "Conway Cabal" (named after General Conway, whose mutinous words slipped

onto Washington's desk) was an irrefutable time of unease in Washington's command, to which Laurens and Hamilton, would be key figures in tackling. This, in turn, was another side to the war, and the loyal efforts of the Lt. Colonels shouldn't be overlooked. Tirelessly, they petitioned to congress and worked to uphold their Commander's honor and reputation. Laurens would be key in holding his father's ear, and in the end, any insubordination was disputed.

However, Laurens was not yet finished dealing with disloyal Generals. In June of 1778, General Charles Lee disobeyed his orders in the Battle of Monmouth, and in cowardice, prematurely attempted to retreat the field despite his purpose to hold the British until Washington's arrival. Luckily, the backup managed to catch Lee as he fled, and the army was ordered back onto the field. In battle, John proceeded with his usual reckless behavior and he, along with the rest of the troops, notably fought bravely. Though counted as a British victory, Monmouth was successful in boosting morale throughout the Rebel Army. A few days later, John would write to his father about how he and Baron Von Steuben avoided capture, while also specifically leaving out any mention of his wounds and his horse being shot from under him.³⁹

Nevertheless, Charles Lee's conduct was still an issue. In July, Lee was court-martialed for cowardice, and John would assist Hamilton in prosecuting him. Matters would only heat up after Lee was convicted, and aghast, the General tried to appeal to Congress. In an attempt to defend himself, Lee openly criticized Washington while in private conversation he slandered his character. Congress sided with the aides, and once more Lee humiliated himself, but not without angering Laurens first. Unlike the defensive approach taken during the Conway Cabal, Laurens challenged Lee to a duel. With Hamilton serving as his second, John wounded the General in the leg within the first round. An almost instantaneous victory, Laurens left the confrontation unscathed.

IV. War in the South

After spending a little less than two years in service directly under Washington, Laurens believed it time he finalized his “black project”. In March of 1779, the Commander in Chief gave him his approval to join the war down south and pursue his project. A bittersweet farewell, John bid his lover and “family” at headquarters “adieu” and headed down to Philadelphia.

First, he had to secure Congress’ approval. Surprisingly, Henry agreed to assist his son in this matter, while Hamilton had sent along a letter of support. He presented this plan and Hamilton’s letter to John Jay, who now succeeded Henry as president, as well as to a committee of southerners whom Henry had put together to deal with the pressing problems in the Carolinas. For weeks, Laurens petitioned and debate raged on. Despite the growing threat of enslaved people defecting to British lines, southern delegates remained opposed to the idea of arming and freeing enslaved blacks- even for their own cause. Yet, by some miracle, John managed to strike a compromise and get his plan approved, under the main condition that he speak to and get the authorization of the “governing powers” of South Carolina and Georgia.³⁶

At this point, it would have seemed John had succeeded. Yet, at the same time, he was of the realization that most everyone expected (and/or wished) for him to fail. His own father, as well as the father figure he saw in Washington, commended his resolve but saw no possibility in his success. Even Congress had pitied and smiled at his naivety, whilst giving him a near-impossible task. In the end, the only person who continued to support him with honesty was Hamilton. The young man wasted no opportunities to remind Laurens of his merit and assure him of his place in his heart. Nevertheless, John journeyed on to South Carolina.

³⁶ Rakove, *Revolutionaries*, 232.

Back in his home state, he would take up his plan with Governor Rutledge, who was unsurprisingly against it. Again, he had nearly just dealt with Charles Town's collapse, and with a vulnerable and unstable city, Rutledge could not begin to allow the main industry of the south to suffer. In all his efforts, once more Laurens was shut down. His father attempted to reassure him but only ended up saying how he "long foresaw and foretold" the opposition he was bound to encounter. In essence, he admitted the futility of such a project.

Despite being offered to serve with Benjamin Franklin as an envoy to France, John continued to press on with his plan and military career. In one last attempt, General Lincoln assisted Laurens and attempted to sway Rutledge once more. Reluctant, the South Carolinians instead agreed to allow a mere 1000 enslaved blacks to serve within the army as artillerymen. John retorted, demanding these men, small a number as it was, be "enfranchised at the expiration of their term of service."³⁷ Congress denied, and the plan fell through.

In April 1780, Charles Town was attacked once more. John saw battle for 6 weeks in his hometown, and though the rebels managed to hold the British back for a while, by May they were forced to surrender. Laurens was taken as a prisoner of war and instead stayed in Philadelphia on parole until an officer of equal status was exchanged for him. Ironically, Francis Kinloch had also reportedly been taken prisoner at Charles Town. Despite their past arguments, Kinloch ended up fighting for the Americans in the South and was even promoted to Captain. Though there is no confirmation, it would not have been surprising if Laurens and Kinloch came across each other again. Though they hadn't written to one another in ages, to imagine Laurens' shock at seeing his old friend/lover amongst the prisoners, is somewhat amusing.

³⁷ Rakove, *Revolutionaries*, 238.

Within this time Hamilton would make an effort to write to John of his engagement to the wealthy Elizabeth Schuyler, daughter of General Philip Schuyler. Both in comedic disinterest as well as a presumably genuine one, Alexander Hamilton described his wife-to-be as “a good-hearted girl” but “not a genius, she has good sense enough to be agreeable, and though not a beauty, she has fine black eyes.”³⁸ Though John had presumably encouraged Hamilton to marry, it could not have been a pleasant thing to hear of it becoming reality. He did not reply; and though a prisoner of war, he was prohibited from fighting, not from writing: he had full capability and time to do so. His silence was deliberate. Yet Hamilton paid no mind to his silence and writes to Laurens again, this being when he admits that “despite Schuyler’s black eyes, I have still a part for the public and another for you...”; he also takes the courtesy to invite Laurens not only to the wedding but “to be witness to the *final consummation*”. Laurens makes up an excuse not to attend the wedding and doesn’t go. It seems he had no interest in watching Hamilton get married.

After 6 months of idleness, John was finally exchanged in November and was released back into the army just in time to partake in the final major battle of the war.

V. Aftermath

The Battle of Yorktown would be the last time Laurens would see and fight alongside his “family” under Washington. He and Hamilton would fight side by side in the war’s conclusive battle, and John would serve as one of the head negotiators of the peace treaty afterward.

With the war practically won, John still longed for battle and he returned under General Nathaniel Greene to the South. While his brothers-in-arms were preparing to settle down and look towards their futures, Laurens remained fighting skirmishes in the backcountry. He

³⁸ Alexander Hamilton to John Laurens, June 30, 1780.

continued to write Hamilton, who by now found himself preoccupied with his wife and unborn child. In an odd manner, as Laurens' letters began to grow more affectionate and more frequent, Hamilton's became less so. Yet, the final letter Hamilton wrote to him disrupted the pattern, in eager encouragement and gentle affection, he urges John to "place down the sword, and put on the toga". He expresses his wish to build this new nation by his side, signing it with the simple phrase: "yours forever". John most likely died before he ever got the letter.

In 1782, John Laurens led a small skirmish at Combahee River, in South Carolina. A notably pointless engagement, one far too reckless for even Laurens' personality. Yet, in a failed attack, John led his troop to battle prematurely and in an instant was shot through the chest. He died shortly after. His recklessness truly was his Achilles heel, and thinking of Lafayette's words regarding Laurens' conduct in Brandywine almost stings.

It was the most expected but unexpected ending to such a vibrant life, it's almost comedic. Here was the man who was wounded in almost every battle he partook in, but still managed to survive, dead in Combahee. It feels wrong, strange, and fitting all in one. In pain, we try to reason with it and understand the oddity of the situation. Nevertheless, facts are facts. John Laurens was dead.

John's death would rattle those around him. Hamilton would be rendered speechless, Henry would mourn, Washington and Greene would hang their heads in sorrow, and the Revolution lost one of its purest sons. Hamilton's abolitionism would die with John, and Laurens' dream for the freedom of enslaved men would in many ways perish.

I then ask the question, what would have happened if Laurens had lived? Personally, it often comes to mind. I like to think congress would have been different, that John would have insisted on abolitionism. It may not have come to pass, but his voice and thoughts were

powerful. At the very least, he would have freed a few hundred enslaved men and women, had he inherited them from his father. I also would hope he'd have still maintained his boyish enthusiasm, for, with it, I think he could have led the country down a purer path. Yet there is no way to know, and speculations are merely speculations.

John Laurens was a complex and fascinating man, and what he managed to do in his short life was nothing short of miraculous. He was the embodiment of an early American hero, a young man so fervent in the righteous ideals of freedom, he bordered upon rashness and naivety. His roots as a pioneer for proto-abolitionism in the South, as well as being a queer historical figure is just as revolutionary as the cause he upheld. These factors are essential not just in the scope of his era, but in the modern age and our current understanding of the American Revolution. Through Laurens, the concepts of early American anti-slavery movements can be better understood, whilst he also serves as a form of kinship for queer individuals to regard the past. In conclusion, the goodness of Laurens' ideals and the complexity of his person should not be overlooked, and his legacy is deserving of recognition and remembering. The least we can do is allow him the ability to live on in our memories. His story matters.

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