

Alexander Hamilton versus Samuel Seabury

By

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In the last December 23 article of 2017 we learned about how a 19 year old immigrant college student attending King's College (today Columbia University) of questionable birth named Alexander Hamilton was radicalized into the patriot cause to regain our rights from England. The year was 1774 and this idealistic young man becomes caught up in the turmoil that would led to the American Revolution. On July 6, 1774 Hamilton first spoke out against the policies of the British government in response to the Boston Tea Party and the Intolerable Acts at a meeting sponsored by the militant Sons of Liberty in New York City.

Hamilton engaged in a series of literary debates in the local New York City press over whether people should demand their basic human rights as Englishmen or support the British government. His opponent was Samuel Seabury, the Episcopal rector of Eastchester's only church, Saint Paul's (today a National Historic Site run by the National Park Service in Mount Vernon). The essence of their debate is captured by Lin-Manuel Miranda in the sixth song of Act 1 in the play *Hamilton*.

For generations Westchester farmers had little inclination to become associated with new political principles that threatened their quiet, prosperous way of life. The citizens of Westchester County including the town of Eastchester were so apathetic politically that they seldom took public measures to oppose the abuses imposed on them by the British parliament. They established no Sons of Liberty and calmly ignored a 1774 invitation from the New York City Committee of Correspondence to form their own committee. Before Hamilton took to pen, there is good reason to believe that the overwhelming majority of the people in the town of Eastchester wanted to stay out of the conflict that had erupted into violence at Lexington and Concord or side with the Loyalists like Seabury who were overtly critical of the revolutionary cause.

Seabury both through his articles and from his pulpit readily disseminated Loyalist views to his parishioners. The name of these pamphlets were *Letters from a Westchester Farmer*. To paraphrase from the song from Miranda's *Hamilton*:

Hear ye, hear ye. My name is Samuel Seabury Do you not know that subjects of the Great Britain are the happiest on earth. We are protected from our many enemies, the papist French and Spanish, and unruly savage Indians by the strongest army and navy on earth. The true causalities of a trade boycott with Britain would be us, not our mother country. These are my thoughts on the Continental Congress, that venomous group of scorpions who would sting us to death. Heed ye the rabble who scream revolution. They have not your interests at heart. Chaos and bloodshed are not a solution. Don't let them led you away. This congress does not speak for me. They're playing a dangerous game. To think of seceding by force of arms or by starving a nation into compliance is proof of a shameful ignorance, pride, and stupidity. To believe America can withstand England is a dreadful infatuation. Congress does not speak for me. They are playing a dangerous game. I pray the king show us his mercy. For shame, for shame. Soon there will be tens of thousands of soldiers with the support of the great British navy. Our once happy homes and farms will be laid waste. For what? For what?

A person was needed to argue against Seabury in print. The person in New York City who stepped forward was no other than a 19 year old collegian named Alexander Hamilton. In two brilliant essays under the title of "The Farmer Refuted" Hamilton anonymously destroyed Seabury's arguments point by point in a slashing style of attack.

You say that we are the happiest people on the face of the earth. But we colonist are being denied the full liberties of British subjects. The sacred rights of mankind...in the whole volume of human nature by the hand of divinity can never be erased or obscured by mortal power. The have-nots are going to win this. Seabury, it's hard to listen to you with a straight face. Honestly you should not even talk about Boston. If Parliament can do it to Boston, they can do it to us. Look at the cost, all that we will lose.

We must work together to resist British tyranny. If the sword of oppression be permitted to lop off one limb without opposition, reiterated strokes will soon dismember the whole body.

These anonymous newspaper articles were published in 1775, more than a year before the signing of the Declaration of Independence. At this time Hamilton never stepped foot into Eastchester's only church presided over by the Loyalist minister Seabury or into the town itself. However it is astonishing Hamilton while still a teenager was able in print to refute the arguments of the Loyalist minister Seabury, a learned and respected colonial leader.

By the time that the Declaration of Independence was signed on July 4, 1776 a significant number of individuals including Eastchester's Town Supervisor, Stephen Ward, had committed themselves to the revolutionary cause. An 18 year old Theodosius Fowler, whose father Jonathan was a prominent Loyalist judge and ally of the Reverend Samuel Seabury, broke with his father and in the summer of 1776 joined Washington's Continental Army. During the ensuing American War for Independence father was turned against son, brother against brother, and wife against husband.

In the next article the previous unknown ways that the careers of Alexander Hamilton and Theodosius Fowler crossed not only during the Revolution but afterwards during the birth of the American nation.

Many thanks to Edna Gabler, author of the chapter "Caught between the Lines, Eastchester and the American Revolution" in *Out of the Wilderness: The Emergence of Eastchester, Tuckahoe, and Bronxville (1664-1214)*. Her thorough research and lucid writing helped make this article possible.

Also gratitude goes to Lin-Manuel Miranda for including Samuel Seabury in his play *Hamilton* and Ron Chernow for his masterpiece history *Alexander Hamilton* that inspired Miranda to write the play.

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