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Sharon McMahon

CREATOR OF SHARON SAYS SO



The Small and the Mighty

Twelve Unsung Americans Who Changed the Course of History,
from the Founding to the Civil Rights Movement

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SHARON McMAHON

THESIS



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*For Chris, who has always believed that anything is possible,
and that I am capable of achieving it.*

INTRODUCTION

NEW YORK

1804

Alexander Hamilton was going to die. And he knew it. He was stoic, though his pain was great. His brow was feverish, his body now partially paralyzed from the bullet lodged in his spine. Dose after dose of wine and laudanum were poured down his throat to take the edge off. The tang of coagulating blood hung so heavy in the July air that the people tending to his injuries could nearly taste it on their tongues. As his wounds oozed, his body grew ever more gray and still.

It was late morning, and while the sun was high in the sky, the shadowy specters of a man meeting his untimely end collected in the corners of the room. Perhaps sensing his time was near, Hamilton asked for the minister of the church to which his family belonged to bring him Communion. But Reverend Bishop Moore refused. He didn't approve of dueling, and he didn't believe Hamilton to be a good enough Christian to deserve the Episcopal rites. It was Hamilton's wife, Eliza, who warmed the pew that Alexander paid for, but A. Ham, as he signed his letters, was rarely seen in Trinity Church.

"Please," Alex might have whispered, "call Reverend John Mason." Mason was a friend who pastored a Presbyterian church. Mason too

refused, saying it gave him no pleasure, but he could not privately give Communion to anyone.

Hamilton became desperate in his last hour to receive the sacrament of the Last Supper. He turned back to Bishop Moore, his eyes pleading for help. "Dueling is barbaric," Moore told him, "and the church can't condone it." With the strength he had left, Hamilton assured Bishop Moore that he regretted his actions, and offered his forgiveness to Aaron Burr for shooting him. If he lived, he promised to spend his days demonstrating just how sorry he was.

Moore relented, and Hamilton, with great difficulty, swallowed the sip of wine and the morsel of bread.

The Hamiltons' seven living children assembled around him as his blood slowly soaked into the floor of his friend's home, a stain that would remain there in memoriam for years. Hamilton opened his eyes, drank in the tearstained faces of the children he delighted in, and slowly closed them again, his lids now feeling quite heavy. For the last time, he kissed the sweaty forehead of his toddler son, Philip, named after the son who had himself died in a duel just a few years earlier.

Eliza felt grief's icy fingers tighten its grip around her chest. Her breath grew rapid, shallow, each unconscious contraction of her diaphragm pushing air painfully through her lungs.

It can't end like this, she might have thought. These babies need you.

Please God, no.

No.

Eliza didn't know it yet, but Alex had already penned her a goodbye letter, just in case things ended poorly during his duel with the vice president of the United States. It read:

This letter, my very dear Eliza, will not be delivered to you unless I shall first have terminated my earthly career. The

*consolations of Religion, my beloved, can alone support you....
Fly to the bosom of your God and be comforted.*

*With my last idea, I shall cherish the sweet hope of meeting
you in a better world.*

*Adieu, best of wives and best of women. Embrace all my
darling children for me.*

Ever yours,

A H[1]

You, my friend, may have heard a version of this story before. But there is one character in this scene who you may not have met. A man who, if we shift our focus just slightly, to the edge of Hamilton's deathbed, opens a portal to a new and fascinating drama. A man whose constant presence in the lives of the Hamiltons gave him access to the inner sanctum on this, the most somber of occasions. A man so overcome with his own emotion at losing his friend that tears openly streamed down his face and he had to excuse himself to regain control.

His name was Gouverneur Morris.

When Hamilton died at the young age of forty-seven (or forty-nine, depending on which record of his birth is to be believed), it was Morris who bore witness to the rudimentary autopsy performed then and there. The doctor fished through Hamilton's abdominal cavity for the bullet that had hit a rib, pierced his liver, and tore through his diaphragm before stopping in his spinal column.

At the funeral service, Gouverneur Morris sat on the altar of Trinity Church in Manhattan, facing the mourners who had assembled to send Hamilton off into eternity. The size of the crowd was so large that when Morris rose to speak, people strained to hear. The sea of bodies clad in wigs and wool absorbed the sound of his voice, and in the back of the sanctuary, Morris seemed to be whispering.

He admitted to the audience that he was struggling to keep it together, and that, "I fear that instead of the language of a public speaker, you will hear only the lamentations of a bewailing friend."^[2]

Morris spoke of the Constitutional Convention, the private meetings where he and Hamilton had played integral roles seventeen years before. Hamilton had been afraid that their efforts at the convention, in which a nation was birthed after the travail of a hot summer's labor, would not be enough. Would the union hold? Would the experiment in a new democracy ultimately prove successful? "In signing that compact he expressed his apprehension that it did not contain sufficient means of strength for its own preservation; and that in consequence we should share the fate of many other republics and pass through Anarchy to Despotism. We hoped better things."^[3]

Perhaps more than any other pair of founders, Morris and Hamilton were intellectual equals. Morris matched Hamilton's wit and his skill in the law, and the two bonded over their loyalty to George Washington during the revolution. While Hamilton was a fatherless immigrant, Morris was raised at an estate that bore his family's name: Morrisania. Hamilton was five foot six and slight of build, while Morris was over six feet and portly. New York would be nothing without the both of them. While Hamilton wrote its financial systems into existence, Morris laid out the grid system that still governs its streets.

Gouverneur Morris, a friend so dear that he drew near to Hamilton in the hour of his death, didn't make it into the Broadway show. He was a scholar, a diplomat, a patriot—all terms that were chiseled onto his headstone when he died a dozen years after eulogizing Hamilton. But no one profits from his likeness. You probably wouldn't recognize him without a caption below his portrait.

And that's a shame. Because without Gouverneur Morris, America as we know it would not exist.

But before we get into that, a bit of background is in order.

Morris had a peg leg, a disfigured arm, and a way with the ladies. His right arm “had all the flesh taken off by a scald,”^[4] boiling water painfully bubbling off his skin and forcing him to leave school for a year. He lost his leg as a young man after a carriage accident, his horses spooking, rearing up, and dashing away without him. Gouverneur was thrown, his leg tangling in the reins and the wheel. He was so badly mangled that doctors had no choice but to amputate below the knee and replace his leg with a wooden one.

Morris’s disability didn’t stop him from dancing the night away in pubs and at parties, and it certainly didn’t stop him from making the romantic rounds in Europe. In fact, he was such a philanderer that John Jay wished Gouverneur had injured a certain other appendage instead of his leg.

Gouverneur Morris was a bachelor until his fifties, perhaps because he never had a shortage of interested girlfriends without the need for vows. Many of the women who found him appealing were married themselves, a fact that seemed to bother Morris little. When he did marry, it was to his housekeeper, Nancy, who had been accused of murdering her own baby. A baby fathered by her sister’s husband.

Morris’s physical maladies followed him until the end of his life. By then, his gout—a disease of those who could afford to eat a diet that promoted the growth of uric acid crystals in the joints—caused excruciating pain in his remaining foot.

Unlike Hamilton, Morris did not die in a duel for his honor. Instead, he perished after a painful—and almost entirely self-inflicted—death. Ultimately, an undiagnosed infirmity—a UTI? kidney stones?—caused him so much agony that he felt the only option available to him was to remove a piece of whalebone from his wife’s corset and attempt to create a type of catheter that he hoped would clear the blockage and bring him relief. Instead, it probably brought an infection, and he was dead not long after.

Now you might be thinking: *Sharon, are you really surprised that we don't have a national holiday dedicated to this guy, this philanderer? This man who married his (allegedly) baby-murdering housekeeper?*

But here's what you might not know: Morris contributed to the early republic as much or more than people like Ben Franklin or John Adams. In fact, his impact is still among the most meaningful of any of the founding fathers. It was Gouverneur—jovial, disabled, and a bit of a rake—whose brilliant mind conceived America's great statement of purpose, the one still recited by schoolchildren. It was his hands that etched "We the people, in order to form a more perfect union..." onto animal skin with a goose feather.

He is the author of some of the most consequential words in world history: the Preamble of the new United States Constitution.

Americans often imagine that the Constitution was written by a bunch of white dudes wearing pants buttoned below the knee, wigs perfectly curled near their faces, because that's exactly what is depicted in the paintings we see in our textbooks. And to an extent, it's true: ideas were argued and hammered out by a conglomeration of men, old and young, wearing period-appropriate clothing.

But which man spoke more than any other at the Constitutional Convention, an event that fully 25 percent of participants abandoned before the job was completed? (This isn't an exaggeration.... one quarter of the attendees at the Constitutional Convention literally went home before the summer was over. They were like, "Listen, it's been real, but I've got to head home. Best of luck to you gentlemen.") It was Morris who clocked in at 173 speeches, despite being absent for a full month of the convention. He argued for things like aristocratic rule and against enslaving other human beings.

Historians often regard James Madison as the father of the Constitution, because his ideas and research on democracy helped shape it thematically, but Morris's role has perhaps even greater

importance. The Preamble he authored established a national identity, described how this new governing document would uphold and protect the shared values men from the twelve states wished to convey. (I say twelve and not thirteen, because Rhode Island refused to send any delegates to the Constitutional Convention.) At age thirty-five, he was chosen to be part of the small committee of men who took all the ideas that had been debated at length and formed them into a document that was short enough to be reprinted in a newspaper and easy enough to read so that ordinary Americans could understand it.

The Constitution was a bold experiment, a practical yet visionary document that nurtured a new nation. It is an entirely human creation, complete with spelling errors (the scribe, Jacob Shallus, might have misspelled Pennsylvania because Alexander Hamilton dictated it incorrectly).^[5] Each article, and later, amendment, reflects a balance between the big ideas of moral philosophers, Enlightenment-era thinkers, the pragmatic Yankees, the egalitarian Quakers, and the high-brow gentility of tidewater planters.

Though you may not have heard of him, Morris was known at the time to be an exceptionally talented writer and communicator. James Madison later said that there was no one who could have done a finer job writing the Preamble and forming the final Constitution. Madison wrote, "A better choice could not have been made, as the performance of the task proved."^[6]

Morris's legacy benefited the United States even after his death. His family's land—fifteen hundred acres of it—had been purchased from a Dutch farmer whose last name was Broncks, and you can now walk down 138th Street in the Bronx, the spelling changed to end with a more Americanized x, knowing that in 1816, a man once lived there who stuck a whalebone up his private parts and died.

What's more, we have him to thank for the party of Lincoln. Gouverneur Morris and his wife, Nancy, had only one child, Gouverneur Morris Jr., who grew up to be a railroad executive and

one of the founders of the Republican Party. I like to think that Morris senior would have been secretly gleeful about this fact. Morris senior, along with Hamilton, was an avowed Federalist, and he hated what the Democratic Republicans became under Thomas Jefferson. Had he lived long enough, there's no question that Morris would have vehemently opposed the populism and chaos that the first Democratic president, Andrew Jackson, brought to the table. Unlike Jackson, Morris was vocally against slavery, and perhaps he would have used his considerable means to financially support his son's quest to start a new political party.

Hamilton had been New York's most famous champion, and news of his sudden passing spread rapidly. On the morning of his funeral, shops were shuttered and flags flew at half-mast all across New York. The hooves of Hamilton's horse *clip-clop, clip-clopped* on the cobblestone streets, the gray steed carrying empty boots turned backward in the stirrups, a symbol of what had been lost.

But Gouverneur Morris, who contributed just as much to the founding of our nation, faded quickly from view.

How many more Americans who changed the course of history are waiting to be discovered?

In this book, I intend to find out.

Before this uniquely American journey we're embarking upon gets too far away from the station, I'm Sharon McMahan. It's pronounced like McWoman, except it's McMan. The *ho* in the middle is silent.

Like Hamilton and Morris, like you, I too hope for better things.

At age twelve, I had a paper route that required me to rise before dawn in the frigid winters of northern Minnesota. As I walked multiple miles each morning, placing the carefully folded daily inside the screen door of subscribers, I sneakily read the news. Making sure the paper was perfectly refolded so the customers couldn't tell

their paper had been preread, I would pick up on page two as I passed over the bridge spanning the river, turn to the back of Section A as I navigated the German Shepherd who guarded the house with the long gravel driveway, and make it to the comics by the time the apartment building loomed on the horizon.

One Christmas morning, I was out the door before my younger siblings were awake, racing through my route so I could return as quickly as possible for our gift opening. No cars buzzed past. No delivery trucks lumbered into the loading dock of the grocery store. It was dark and still, and the air felt unseasonably warm.

I finished the last of my deliveries, shedding my jacket because I'd practically run three miles with a heavy load of papers flopping at my hip. As I crossed the bridge over the river, the kind of river whose waters carved gorges and canyons into rock before tumbling into the churning foam of waterfalls, I noticed movement out of the corner of my eye.

In the distance, I saw them: auroras. The northern lights. Not the more common faint glow of green that we sometimes glimpsed from our second-floor bathroom window, but the kind that choreographed a ballet set to the unheard symphony of the universe. Great columns of pink and purple shot up above treetops, mint green and deep blue sashayed above my head in a private show, for me and only me, it seemed.

It ended almost as quickly as it began, as the auroras gave way to the first streaks of daylight over the vast expanse of an inland sea: Lake Superior. I suddenly felt very small, a child on a bridge on a round rock that orbited a medium-size star in one of nearly an infinite number of galaxies.

And yet, when the sun crested the horizon and light filled the sky, the auroras didn't disappear. I just couldn't see them anymore. The rising of the sun didn't erase the excitations of light particles in the earth's electromagnetic field. The colors were still there, it's just that daylight made them hard to see.

So too is much of history: the overshadowing suns—the men with the best military strategy, the people with the most ships, those with vast fortunes and political power—they eclipse the beauty that is there, waiting for us in the quiet predawn hours. The people outside the dominant caste, those whose impact has been missed by people who either don't know where to look or who have intentionally decided not to, the auroras of history: it is their stories I have come to find the most interesting.

When I went to high school and began to truly study history, it was the names I didn't recognize that were often the most intriguing. *Who* spoke at Alexander Hamilton's funeral? Why have I never heard of him before? In the days before the internet put the entirety of human knowledge at our fingertips, the library was my friend. The library, still the most democratic institution on earth, perched but a block away from my childhood home.

Mary, the slight librarian with wire-framed glasses whose face reminded me of an inquisitive bird, would greet me with a small smile and a pleasant hello when she saw me at each visit. The library was where you could read about the 1835 Halley's Comet sighting, then go immediately to the card catalog (It was electronic, okay? I am not *that* old.) and find more information about all the things that fascinated you.

When I became a classroom teacher, it was the auroras of history I loved to share with my students the most. "And did you know... DID. YOU. KNOW," I would say, building suspense for the sixteen-year-olds whose eyes stared back at me, "did you know that women made the best spies in World War II?"

It is from many years in the high school classroom, and now the much larger classroom of the internet, where millions of people pepper me with their questions in real time, that I learned to anticipate what people will say and wonder about. Some people call me America's Government Teacher. Trevor Noah said I was *not* a

thirst trap. George W. Bush smirked, with a twinkle in his eye, when he learned that people in my community call themselves Governerds.

I wrote this book because I have long suspected that the best Americans are not always famous. More than twenty years of research has confirmed my intuition. The best Americans are not the critics, they are the doers. They are the people who went for broke when everyone else yelled to turn back. They are those who know that one becomes great because of who they lift up, not who they put down. I have learned that no one reaches their final moments of mortal existence and whispers to their loved ones, "I wish I had gotten in some more sick burns in the comments section on Facebook."

And like Morris, like Hamilton, like you and me, these great Americans are flawed and complicated. Centuries later, we're still raising eyebrows at some of Morris's choices. Many of his qualities are not what we'd write down in a list of traits we'd like our children to emulate. And the whalebone thing was really unfortunate.

Morris wrote in the Preamble:

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

But perhaps when our fifth grade teachers asked us to memorize these lines, we weren't able to fully internalize their meaning. We were eleven years old; let's cut ourselves some slack. What does the Preamble mean? Put more simply:

We, the citizens of this new country that is wholly independent from Britain, want you to know that we intend to:

Establish justice. This phrase gives us a sense of moral rightness, of equality, and of fairness.

Ensure domestic tranquility and provide for the common defense. This demonstrates a government's duty to maintain a sense of peace within its own borders, and establishes its commitment to protect its people from foreign threats.

Promote the general welfare. This means to work for the common good. Over the centuries, what constitutes the "common good" has changed significantly. What was viewed as the common good in 1787 can only be projected onto the present in the vaguest of terms, especially since many of the rights we now enjoy were only extended to a minority of people when the words were originally written. What common good means today is still being refined.

Secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity. This promise is now a hallmark of any democracy—the protections of civil liberties under the law, and a limiting of the power of the government so people are shielded from an overreaching and authoritarian regime—something Gouverneur Morris said Hamilton feared until the very end.

The text of the Preamble imagined America at its finest:

Just.

Peaceful.

Good.

And free.

With astonishing regularity, Americans have held fast to these ideals, despite the clickbait stories that portend calamity. And America has too often fallen short of these standards. Both of these things are true at the same time.

America has been just, and it has perpetuated injustice. We have been peaceful, and we have perpetrated acts of violence. We have been—and are—good. And we have done terrible things to people who didn't deserve them. It has been the land of the free while simultaneously sanctioning oppression.

Such is often the experience of any government run by fallible human beings. Sometimes we surprise ourselves in our capacity for greatness, and sometimes the weight of regret wraps around us like a chain.

The ideals outlined in the Constitution represent our national purpose, the raft we must cling to in the storm, the breath in our lungs, the beat in our chest: Just. Peaceful. Good. Free.

Ordinary people conjured this mission. Ordinary men like Gouverneur Morris.

What you're about to read are the stories of the small and the mighty. The stories of people you may not have heard of, but who changed the course of American history anyway. Not the presidents, but the telephone operators. Not the aristocrats, but the schoolteachers. You'll meet a woman astride a white horse riding down Pennsylvania Avenue; a young boy detained in a Japanese incarceration camp; a formerly enslaved woman on a mission to reunite with her daughter; a poet on a train; and a teacher who learns to work with her enemies. More than one thing is bombed, and multiple people surprisingly become rich. Some rich with money, and some wealthy with things that matter more.

It is my hope that by the time you turn the last page of this book, these small and mighty people will become like familiar friends, part of a community of ancestors, a great cloud of witnesses who surround us, those who light the path we journey in our quest to make the world more just, more peaceful, more good, and more free.

I'll be your guide along the way. Welcome.

And buckle up.