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### Episode 335: Andrew Porwancher, "The Jewish World of Alexander Hamilton" Transcript

**Announcer:** [00:00:00](#) You're listening to an Airwave Media podcast.

**Liz Covart:** [00:00:04](#) *Ben Franklin's World* is a production of Omohundro Institute and is sponsored by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

00:00:22 Hello and welcome to Episode 335 of *Ben Franklin's World*, the podcast dedicated to helping you learn more about how the people and events of our early American past have shaped the present day world we live in. And I'm your host Liz Covart.

Alexander Hamilton played important roles in the founding of the United States. First, Hamilton helped the United States secure its independence with his service in the Continental Army. Second, he played an active role in helping to shape and frame the new United States Constitution. And third, Hamilton placed the United States on a strong economic footing when he crafted his debt assumption and economic development plans as the first secretary of the treasury. But how did Hamilton come to know so much about the United States' economic future and the systems that could help provide the new nation with a strong and secure economic footing? And how did Hamilton come to work for and believe that the new United States should be a nation that welcomed all religions and religious worship?

Andrew Porwancher, the Wick Cary Professor of History at the University of Oklahoma and the Ernest May Fellow at Harvard's Belfer Center, joins us to investigate the Jewish world and upbringing of Alexander Hamilton. Now, during our investigation, Andrew reveals details about Hamilton's childhood in the Caribbean and how he came to be educated at a Jewish school, Hamilton's work as a clerk for an internationally focused mercantile firm and information about the many ways Hamilton worked to enact an internationally focused economy for the new United States and to include Jews in American civil and political society.

But first, did you know that we're now offering transcripts for each new episode? In an effort to make *Ben Franklin's World* as accessible as possible The Omohundro Institute has started to make transcripts for each new episode, beginning with episode 331. That's our "Discovery of the Williamsburg Bray School" episode.



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You'll find links to these transcripts on each episode's show notes page. Now, in terms of making transcripts available for episodes 1 through 330, it's something we're looking into. Each episode transcript costs around \$115 to make. So it's a really expensive undertaking to transcribe our entire back catalog, but we're looking into it and we'll let you know when we have a plan to do this work. Now, one way you can help support the extra costs of episode transcription is to become a subscriber to the *Ben Franklin's World* subscription program. You'll find the details at [benfranklinworld.com/subscribe](http://benfranklinworld.com/subscribe). And if you're already a subscriber, thank you. Please know that it's your financial support that helps make these new episode transcripts possible.

Okay. Are you ready to venture into the Jewish world of Alexander Hamilton? Let's go meet our guest historian.

Our guest is the Wick Cary Associate Professor of History at the University of Oklahoma. He is currently serving as the Ernest May Fellow at Harvard University's Belfer Center, and his research interests are in constitutional studies. He's an award-winning teacher, and he's written several books, including *The Jewish World of Alexander Hamilton*, which won the *Journal of the American Revolution's* Book of the Year Award and an Independent Publisher Book Award for Biography. Welcome to *Ben Franklin's World*, Andrew Porwancher.

**Andrew Porwancher:** [00:03:50](#)

Thank you so much, Liz. I am a huge fan of this podcast. I've listened to so many episodes. You have such great guests and it's really a thrill for me to get to be a participant and not just a listener. So thank you.

**Liz Covart:** [00:04:04](#)

Well, thank you, Andrew. We're glad that you enjoy the podcast and we're really excited to have you as a guest. Now, I wonder if we could start our conversation by talking a bit about your historical interests. So you're a scholar of American constitutional history, and you also seem to be interested in Jewish history and for you, these two areas of distinct study aren't separate. They seem to combine and allow you to produce a lot of really interesting studies and work. So would you tell us about your historical interests and where you see American constitutional history and Jewish history as intersecting?



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**Andrew Porwancher:** [00:04:39](#)

There is absolutely a deep connection between my interest in Jewish history and constitutional history. I came to constitutional history first by way of the classroom. I had written my dissertation on other topics in legal history, trial procedure and legal philosophy, but I got hired to teach constitutional history. And so I had this experience that many newly minted PhDs have of being a new professor and having to learn a subject as you're teaching it to undergrads for the first time. And what I came to see about constitutional history is that Jewish history is a rich window onto that topic. The presence of even a single Jew in a society matters. For constitutional reasons, the presence of that Jew forces upon that society a profound question, will Jew and Gentile stand upon a legal equality?

And many nations in many ages have grappled with that question, but it takes on particular significance in the early years of the American Republic. This is a country founded in the name, if not quite the reality, of equality and American Jews by and large spill blood and spend treasure in service of the revolutionary cause. And when America secures its accession from the British Empire, those Jews begin agitating for the equality promised them in the Declaration of Independence. And so the status of the American Jew in that latter quarter of the 18th century becomes something of a litmus test for whether this new constitutional order will fulfill or forget this bounding promise of equality.

**Liz Covart:** [00:06:24](#)

That's interesting. And it's a great answer and not at all the answer I thought you might give when I asked that question, which is, I really thought that you might reply as many scholars who share your interest answer in that you see the Talmud or the body of Jewish law as a precedent for establishing laws in civil society. And I admit that as someone who's studying the Articles of Confederation, that first constitution of the United States, I haven't seen religious texts like the Talmud come up. Although I admit that you will see states like Massachusetts, who were founded on religious grounds, bring up the Bible and other Christian texts as they create their constitutions and government. So your answer's really great and solid, but I admit that I had some assumptions about what you might answer.

**Andrew Porwancher:** [00:07:09](#)

There's a lot of rich work that's been done in the realm of what I've heard called Hebraic republicanism about the influence of the



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Hebrew Bible on American state craft, looking at the influence of the ancient Israelite system of government as a model for how modern nations, including the United States, might construct its own legal order. These are really interesting topics. They're not central to my book because Hamilton was not necessarily translating the Talmud into legal doctrine, but there is a rich vein to tap in this time period. And it is yet one more example of how a relatively small Jewish community in the early days of the Republic does not necessarily translate to a marginal influence of Judaism on this larger American culture.

**Liz Covart:**                    [00:08:13](#)

And we should dig into this influence of Judaism on early American culture. So in your latest book, *The Jewish World of Alexander Hamilton*, you know that before we can really understand the Jewish world that Hamilton operated in, we really need to understand Hamilton's understanding of Christianity and his views of himself as a Christian. Andrew, would you tell us how Alexander Hamilton viewed Christianity and himself as a Christian?

**Andrew Porwancher:**   [00:08:40](#)

Hamilton in his American adulthood has an ambivalent relationship towards organized Christianity. It's a relationship that's complex. It's enigmatic in many respects. It's fodder for debate among historians, but scholars generally agree that for at least most of his American adulthood, he's nominally identifying as a Christian. He's not terribly engaged with Christian life. And that ambivalence is particularly striking Liz, because Hamilton is married to a devout Christian woman in Elizabeth Schuyler. He rents a pew for her at Trinity Church in lower Manhattan, but he doesn't join the church himself. In the communion records, you see her name, you don't see her husband's name.

Some scholars suggest that Hamilton came to embrace a Christian identity in his late years as a consequence of seeking solace after the tragic death of his son in a duel. I'm skeptical of that conventional wisdom, because if you look at the contemporary sources from the time of Hamilton's passing, on his deathbed with Aaron Burr's bullet in his spine, Hamilton for the first time takes communion and both Hamilton's admirers and detractors acknowledge that this was actually an anomalous departure from him from his usual distance from Christian ritual. So scholars suggest that Hamilton may have been largely distant from Christianity because he was a deist. I suspect that Hamilton's lack of interest in organized



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Christian life was a residue of a Caribbean childhood in which he was born and raised Jewish.

**Liz Covart:** [00:10:36](#)

Well, that was a bombshell mic drop statement, Andrew, but I think we need more to be convinced of your claim. So would you tell us more about Hamilton's Caribbean upbringing and why and how it seems he was raised Jewish?

**Andrew Porwancher:** [00:10:50](#)

I should state at the outset that this is admittedly a probabilistic argument. The historical record in the 18th century Caribbean is degraded. We've lost documents to fires, to hurricanes. Some of the archival material I've used from the Caribbean is partially eaten by bugs, so the documents look like pieces of Swiss cheese, so you're trying to guess missing vowels and consonants. But we have sufficient evidence, I believe, to make a strong circumstantial case that Hamilton in all likelihood was born and raised Jewish. He was born to a woman named Rachel Levine on the British Caribbean island of Nevis. And Hamilton is not enrolled in a Christian school. His mother actually chooses to enroll him in a Jewish school and this at a time when all of the evidence suggests that Jewish schools exclusively educated Jewish children. So the education of any given child at a Jewish school in this time creates a strong presumption of that child's Jewish identity.

Hamilton ends up leaving the Caribbean island of Nevis with his mother when he's around 11. He winds up on Saint Croix, a Danish Caribbean island, and his mother passes away soon thereafter. I suspect that any Jewish identity Hamilton might have had dies with his mother. And there is evidence from the Caribbean that would corroborate my theory that Hamilton actually starts identifying as a Christian during his teenage years before he comes to America, but that he's a relative newcomer to the Christian faith.

So between the time of his mother's death at the age of 13 and the time Hamilton comes to America at the age of 18, he's living on Saint Croix. And when he's 17, he's called to give testimony in a legal case. And he's actually barred from giving sworn testimony, even though he's claiming to be Anglican, because he's never taken communion, which would be a real oddity for a 17 year old at that time, because the Anglican rites specify that the paired rituals of



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confirmation and communion are to take place in childhood. He has insufficient bonafides as a Christian.

So the genealogical evidence for his Jewish identity, his mother's Jewish identity is more complex. And if people want the exhaustive analysis of seven years of research, I direct them to the book, but those are just a couple pieces of evidence that point, in my mind, towards a strong probability that Hamilton was not as we've long assumed a cradle to grave Christian, but in fact, he had a Jewish identity in some sense of that term for some stretch of his early life.

**Liz Covart:** [00:13:48](#)

This has me thinking about a recent article in the New York Times, perhaps you even remember it as well, where they pulled parents from across the United States and asked them how they felt about history education. And in that poll, it revealed that many parents really felt that history is just about the facts. But as historians and as listeners of this podcast, we know that history is also about interpreting those facts, making sense of those facts. And it sounds like Andrew, that you've gone even the next step, which is that you've used the facts you've come across to make some informed speculation. So could you tell us more about the facts and the historical sources that you have and what made you feel comfortable about making this informed speculation that it is likely that Alexander Hamilton was raised Jewish?

**Andrew Porwancher:** [00:14:35](#)

This is a great question, Liz. Every sentence in this book I agonized over because it was really important for me to decide whether I'm using language like maybe, or perhaps, or probably, or in all likelihood, or is not necessarily so, because I'm constantly thinking about the level of certainty I can plausibly make for any given sub-claim that's a constituent element of this larger enterprise. And that depends on the piece of evidence and it's context. So with someone like Alexander Hamilton, who in so many respects was a marginal figure, not in his adult life, but certainly as a Caribbean child, what we have are just scraps of evidence and these scraps have to be read within the larger context.

So I'll give you one example. Hamilton's mother, Rachel Levine was not born Jewish. She was born Christian. And my claim is that in all likelihood, she converts to Judaism prior to Alexander's birth, to marry a Danish merchant named Johann Michael Levine. Now, Hamilton scholars have fought for generations that Levine is likely



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not a Jew because they tell us he's not identified in the Danish land records and census registers as a Jew. Well, I went through those Danish records from Saint Croix. I actually went through 3000 of them. And what I found was that these scholars were right. Johann Levine is not identified as a Jew, but neither were the other Jews that were living on Saint Croix at that time.

Then I asked myself, well, what else do we know about Johann Levine? Well, we know his name appears under many spellings, including Lavin, Lewein, Levin, spellings that match how Jews of Levitic descent spell their surnames. In the 18th century, we know that he was working as a merchant, a typical Jewish profession at that time. He had come to Saint Croix from another Caribbean island with a large Jewish community, and Hamilton's own grandson, explicitly identifies Levine as a quote, "Rich Danish Jew." And then after Johann meets Rachel and marries her, they have a child, Peter Levine, who they do not have infant baptized, which was standard practice for island Christians and decades later, Peter Levine undertakes an adult baptism to join an Anglican church under circumstances that make little sense unless he's converting to Christianity.

So taking all of these different pieces of evidence together, I believe based on what we know from Danish records, what we know about church records, the commonality of baptisms for infants on Saint Croix at that time, we can make a strong inferential claim that Johann Levine was in all likelihood Jewish and that Rachel in all probability converts to Judaism to marry him. My research proceeds from the premise that governs all research, which is that the best argument is the one that accounts for the most evidence, even when that evidence falls shy of certainty.

**Liz Covart:**

[00:17:57](#)

You've mentioned that to really understand Hamilton, we need to understand that context, the Jewish context of the Caribbean, which is where Alexander Hamilton was born. And Stessa would really like to know more about that Jewish context of the Caribbean. So you mentioned that Hamilton was born on Nevis. He spent time in Saint Croix. Would you tell us more about the Jewish community or communities that live in the Caribbean and how these communities may have varied from island to island?





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**Andrew Porwancher:** [00:18:24](#)

The Caribbean was the center of Jewish life in the Western hemisphere in the 18th century. So much of Jewish history is focused on European history, on the history of the Middle East and to a lesser extent on North American Jewish history. But when you're talking about the 18th century, the Caribbean is this incredibly rich focal point of Jewish life. There are a number of Jews who flee Spain and Portugal and they're escaping the inquisition. They find their way to more tolerant places like Holland and to places like British and Dutch imperial possessions in the New World.

In Brazil, in the 1650s when the Dutch controlled it, scholars believe that perhaps as much as 50%, one half of the free population was Jewish. And then the Portuguese take it over. They implement the inquisition there and then this massive Jewish community in Brazil fans out and joins some preexisting Jewish communities in places in the Caribbean, 23 of them go to what was then New Amsterdam, what's now New York, the beginnings of communal Jewish life in North America. And so we do see some Ashkenazi Jews, Jews of German and Polish descent in the Caribbean, but it's predominantly Sephardi. It's predominantly Iberian Jews escaping the far reaches of the inquisition.

And if you go to the cemetery on Nevis, where 25% of the free population was Jewish, you'll find those gravestones in the cemetery have three languages on them, English, because it's a British colony, Portuguese because they're from Portugal, and of course Hebrew because they're Jews. So you have this massive Jewish exodus in the Caribbean. Some islands, like Saint Croix, are home to just a few scattered Jews, but these other islands, like Curaçao, 40% of the free population was Jewish. So you have this flourishing Jewish community and they are there largely because of the sugar trade. So they're pushed into the Caribbean by religious persecution, but they're pulled there by economic opportunity.

The Caribbean sugar trade of course runs on slave labor. There was a form of slavery in the Caribbean that as other scholars have noted makes the American South look almost genteel by comparison. Jews are particularly well positioned to take advantage of the opportunities that the sugar trade presents. Jews are skilled in multiple languages, they're skilled in commerce and they're embedded in trade networks with Jews in cities on both sides of





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the Atlantic. And so Hamilton is growing up in this Jewish Caribbean world, that's characterized by a polyglot culture by commercial trade, by an international perspective. It doesn't take a huge inferential leap to see the relationship between this really international trade oriented history from which he comes and the visionary treasury secretary that he'll ultimately become under George Washington.

**Liz Covart:** [00:21:42](#)

Many of us develop a sense of our religious selves when we're children and you mentioned earlier that Alexander Hamilton, while he was living on Nevis, attended a Jewish school. Could you tell us more about the Jewish education Hamilton would've received in that school and perhaps the education he would've received in the larger Jewish community of Nevis?

**Andrew Porwancher:** [00:22:03](#)

One quarter of the free population was Jewish and to give listeners some perspective, for every free person there would probably be seven or eight slaves. Hamilton doesn't really speak about his upbringing. He's taciturn in his adulthood about his youth, even with his own family. But the one warm memory he does share from his childhood is this time at the Jewish school. And we know he begins rudimentary study of the Torah because he tells his children that when he was little, his teacher would put him on a table so they would be eye level and he would recite to her the 10 commandments in the original Hebrew. This is a really striking vignette and one based on the historical evidence we have. Hard to imagine for a Christian child at the time.

We don't have surviving records from the Jewish school. And so I'm hesitant to say too much about what that curriculum might have been, but we know that Hamilton was particularly precocious with foreign tongues throughout his life. Even though he'd never been to France, people say he spoke French without an accent. And we know that he's learning Hebrew. So Hamilton is picking up something of a Jewish education, certainly would've learned something of the Torah, likely would've learned something of Talmud. In fact, Jewish schools were called Talmud Torahs. And when Hamilton is later describing God in his adult life, he doesn't describe God in a deistic way as if the conventional wisdom about Hamilton being deistic is right. He doesn't describe God as a clock maker. He describes God the way that any Jewish child would've



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learned in a Jewish school at that time, that God is an active intervener in the affairs of humankind.

**Liz Covart:** [00:23:59](#)

When Alexander Hamilton was 12 years old, his mother Rachel moved them from Nevis to the Danish island of Saint Croix. Not long after their arrival, Rachel died. Andrew, what was Hamilton's life like on Saint Croix as a child who is newly orphaned, who has had this Jewish education and who is now living on an island without a significant Jewish population?

**Andrew Porwancher:** [00:24:21](#)

Hamilton starts working as a clerk on Saint Croix even before his mother's death. And when she dies, he's denied his inheritance by the Danish courts. And so his livelihood as a clerk is all the more important. And as I mentioned earlier, I suspect Hamilton would've had little incentive to carry on a Jewish identity at this point. He's no longer on Nevis, home to the sizable Jewish community that had educated him. He's on Saint Croix with just a few Jews. A youth as plucky and precocious as Alexander Hamilton would've been disinclined to compound his troubles as a penniless orphan with a second class religious status.

Hamilton continues his work as a clerk, although he doesn't leave the island until the age of 18, he is thrust into the midst of these transatlantic trading networks. He is learning in these formative years about credit, debt, finance, currency. When we think about other American founders, they're growing up on farms and plantations, they're in a very different form of economy. Hamilton uniquely is honing all the skills that would position him to become the visionary of America's financial future in his later life as the nation's first treasury secretary. And so if we want to understand Hamilton the adult, we have to dial the clock back to these Caribbean years. Not just because it helps us make sense of his relationship to religion, but it also helps us make sense of his far better known relationship to the world of economics and trade.

**Liz Covart:** [00:25:59](#)

Do you think there was a particular lesson that Hamilton learned while serving as a clerk in these big international trading houses in the Caribbean that played a big role in his later career as a revolutionary and as a founder of the United States?

**Andrew Porwancher:** [00:26:13](#)

I know from listening to this podcast that you always ask tough questions, Liz. That's why I wanted to come on, to challenge



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myself. It's a really good question. I think that Hamilton learned that the future lay in transatlantic trade, and he did not deny the importance of farming. America was 90% agriculture at the time, but Hamilton understood because he had lived this reality that the American government should pursue policies that allowed the United States to compete with the foremost powers of the world in the global marketplace. And it is ultimately Hamilton's future rather than Jefferson's agrarian self-sustaining America of small farmers that came to characterize the next couple hundred years of our history.

**Liz Covart:** [00:27:09](#)

As Andrew mentioned, Alexander Hamilton left Saint Croix at the age of 18 and found his way to New York City. And I think many of us have heard Hamilton the musical and how Lin-Manuel Miranda penned some words that paid homage to a story and an account that Hamilton wrote about a hurricane that really impacted his island home in 1772. Andrew, could you tell us about Hamilton's hurricane account and how this writing about a hurricane helped Hamilton make his way to mainland North America?

**Andrew Porwancher:** [00:27:42](#)

In August of that year, this catastrophic hurricane brutalizes the Eastern Caribbean. Its eye passes directly over Hamilton's island of Saint Croix. Amid the twin horrors of gale force winds and 70 foot waves, ships from the harbor are flung inland, homes are reduced to rubble, the lives of hundreds of islanders summarily extinguished. And the best surviving description we have of the storm, as you allude to, comes from the pen of none other than an 18 year old Alexander Hamilton and his description of the storm is published in a local island paper. And according to lore, the islanders are so taken by his precocious facility with language that they pass the hat for a worthy cause. They raise money to send him to America and he goes off to college.

And I'll add a caveat to that lore, which is that almost certainly the town superiors on the island already recognized Hamilton's talent, were likely already making plans to send him to the mainland for college. And it was not at all unusual for the island's elite to go to college. Hamilton's not quite elite because he's a clerk, but he has some friends and some mentors who are elites, who would like to find a path for him to advance his station in life. And Hamilton's benefactors likely saw this letter as a confirmation of an impetus



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that already existed to send him to North America, as opposed to an originator of the idea.

**Liz Covart:** [00:29:17](#)

There were also some scholars who argue that the language that Hamilton used in his hurricane account is the language of Christianity. So what do you make of this argument, Andrew, that Hamilton was using the language of Christianity in this hurricane account?

**Andrew Porwancher:** [00:29:33](#)

Absolutely. Hamilton at this point in time is unquestionably identifying as a Christian. The year before, as mentioned, he testifies in a court case and although he is forbidden from giving sworn testimony, because he hasn't taken communion, he's still telling people he's Anglican. And he writes in this letter that's published in the island paper, "Jesus be merciful." So there's no doubt to my mind that Hamilton is actively identifying as a Christian in his later teenage years. It's an identity that he carries with him into his new life in New York.

**Liz Covart:** [00:30:09](#)

In his book, *The Jewish World of Alexander Hamilton*, Andrew makes clear that his book is just as much about Hamilton as it is about the Jewish world of the early American Republic. Andrew, would you tell us about Judaism in the early American Republic? What was the Jewish world of Hamilton like after he moved to revolutionary New York City?

**Andrew Porwancher:** [00:30:30](#)

When Hamilton comes to America, what would become the United States in a few years is home to a small but lively Jewish community. There are concentrations of Jews in coastal seaports, Newport, Rhode Island; New York City; Philadelphia; Charleston, South Carolina; and Savannah, Georgia. Jews are drawn there partly so that they can live in a community with other Jews, partly to be near synagogues and partly for the economic opportunities that these cities presented. Jews tended far less often than their Gentile counterparts to be farmers and agrarians and were much more likely to be traders and financiers. And so they naturally gravitate to urban life.

Jews at that time, in the early years of the Republic, experience a fair degree of freedom relative to Jews in many other parts of the world. And yet they still experience the residue of Old World anti-Semitism. So there are ways in which America embraces a real



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liberality about extending rights to the Jewish community. For instance, in the federal Constitution drafted in 1787, ratified in 1788, there is a clause banning religious tests for office. Now in most states that adopt constitutions after the beginning of the American Revolution, they explicitly ban Jews from serving in state office.

So at the very moment in time in the late 1780s, a Jew could not serve in the state legislature in Pennsylvania, but a Jew could be president of the United States. And I think that discrepancy encapsulates a nation that is torn between the promise of the New World and the prejudice of the Old. And it is in that contested terrain that the Jewish community is living in the United States. It's into that contested terrain that Hamilton enters and becomes, although he's identifying a Christian, more of a champion of the American Jewish community than any other founder.

**Liz Covart:** [00:32:49](#)

To dig a little bit deeper into this topic about the religious situation in early North America, and then of course the early United States, could you talk more about colonial British North America's views on Jews and maybe how those views changed or did not change as the colonies became the United States in 1776 and then began to formalize their new national government first under the Articles of Confederation and then with the Constitution?

**Andrew Porwancher:** [00:33:15](#)

By and large in British North America, Jews are faring pretty well, but they're still second class citizens. So there are legal prohibitions on Jews preventing them from entering certain professions like elected office and practicing law in many colonies. And yet Jews have a number of opportunities to build fortunes, working in trade and finance and commerce. Jews enjoy a fair degree of religious freedom. They can build synagogues, they can worship together according to the dictates of their faith and their conscience. And yet every Jewish community in colonial America sees its cemetery desecrated at some point.

So the story of Jews in British North America is a mixed bag. The story of Jews after 1776 is also very much a conflicted picture, but the needle is moving away from prejudice and towards equality. Progress doesn't always happen in a straight line. It happens in different states at different times to different degrees. Prejudice can flare up in one moment and then subside in another. But by and



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large, the push is towards granting greater rights to Jews as America moves on in time from the Revolution towards this future where increasingly Jew and Gentile do stand upon an equality.

**Liz Covart:** [00:34:49](#)

So say you're Alexander Hamilton, you've just received money to go from Saint Croix to British North America. You find yourself in New York City and you have this background and education in Judaism. What do you make of this anti-Semitic New World Christian society that has New World hopes and dreams and also Old World prejudices?

**Andrew Porwancher:** [00:35:11](#)

Hamilton would've been unsurprised by this combination of freedom and prejudice that Jews were inhabiting, because Caribbean Jews in general and Jews on Nevis in particular had lived that same experience. For the Sephardic community in a place like Nevis, they did not live in British colonies under the threat of death just for being Jewish as they had in Portugal. And yet Jews in places like Nevis are often convenient scapegoats during troubled times. Jewish success and commerce is perceived to come at the expense of Christians. Jews are kicked out of a number of Caribbean islands. Their continued residence is not a foregone conclusion in Jewish eyes. And so the story of the Jewish experience, whether it's British North America or the British Caribbean, there's a common thread there, a common tension between hope and hazard that these Jews have to inhabit.

So Hamilton arriving to New York, would've found himself in so many respects in an environment in which he would've been poised to thrive. He knew what it meant to live in a polyglot world with people from many different nationalities. He knew what it meant to live in a center of trade and finance. And he knew what it meant to live in a city where Jews were carefully navigating the challenges of enduring bigotry and the opportunities of a newfound Republic committed, at least in name, to an egalitarian vision of civic life.

**Liz Covart:** [00:36:59](#)

Now, if you recall, Hamilton went to New York City. He studied at King's College, which is now Columbia University. He joined the Revolution and worked to get New York City some artillery. He then served under General George Washington as an aide, and then he left the army to practice law in New York City, all before he became instrumental in trying to draft the new constitution in



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1787 and worked to shape the new national government as the first secretary of the treasury. Andrew, we need to take a moment to talk about our episode sponsor. When we're done, Ashley has a question for you about Hamilton's Jewish education and his role as a Founding Father.

**Rob Parkinson:** [00:37:36](#)

Hi, I'm Rob Parkinson, Associate Professor of History at Binghamton University and my new book, *Thirteen Clocks: How Race United the Colonies and Made the Declaration of Independence*, published by the Omohundro Institute, is out now. This book covers the 15 months between Lexington and Concord and the Declaration of Independence. And we think we know that story cold, especially in 1776, it is a straight March from Thomas Paine and Common Sense through Thomas Jefferson denouncing the king in the Declaration of Independence. What I have found is we have forgotten so much of what happened in those 15 months and especially about the presence of African Americans and Native Americans in that story. And then worries and opportunities about how we can exploit these fears and use that as a basis for this extremely fragile thing of unity. Get your copy of *Thirteen Clocks: How Race United the Colonies and Made the Declaration of Independence* wherever you buy your books.

**Liz Covart:** [00:38:39](#)

To order your copy of Rob Parkinson's *Thirteen Clocks* for the low price of \$20, visit [benfranklinworld.com/clocks](http://benfranklinworld.com/clocks). That's [benfranklinworld.com/clocks](http://benfranklinworld.com/clocks).

Andrew, Ashley would like to know what impact, if any impact, Hamilton's Jewish education and experience had on his participation in the revolution and on his perspectives of government. So what do you think? Did Hamilton's Jewish upbringing have any impact or influence on his role as a Founding Father?

**Andrew Porwancher:** [00:39:10](#)

Ashley, that is a fantastic question. And indeed the bulk of my book is dedicated to answer it, as fulsomely as the historical record allows. And let me highlight three areas briefly where Hamilton advances a vision of America's legal and economic order, where Jew and Gentile will stand as equals.

One is in his role as an influential alumnus of his alma mater. You mentioned that it went from being called Kings to Columbia.





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When they reopen the college after the war, they rename it. You can't fight a war against a monarchy, and have your alma mater called Kings, it's unseemly. So they give it this name, Columbia. But Hamilton working in tandem with John Jay, with whom he'll later collaborate with more famously on the Federalist Papers, Hamilton and Jay are instrumental in implementing reforms for Jews that are remarkably advanced by the standards of the day. Hamilton is instrumental in putting the first Jew on the board of an American college. There wouldn't be another Jew on Columbia's board until the 20th century. He is instrumental in changing the requirements for eligibility for the Columbia presidency, so that Jews could be president of Columbia. We don't see other colleges from that time period making those changes until again, the 20th century. Hamilton, 150 years ahead of his time in this regard.

Hamilton interestingly also is involved in aggregating the requirement that undergraduates at Columbia practice mandatory forms of Christian worship and it's particularly striking because it's an entirely Christian student body at that time. So in all of these respects, Hamilton is remarkably forward thinking as a higher education reformer.

He is of course, best known for his role as treasury secretary. Hamilton sets into motion this grand vision for American finance that is so forward thinking most of his contemporaries couldn't begin to grasp his pressions. They feared that he was engaging in some dark arts of finance and they reach for the cudgel of anti-Semitism as a weapon in a bid to derail his economic agenda. Anti-Semitism was much more mainstream in American politics at that time than it is today, although it's making something of a resurgence now. But in the 1790s and the 1780s, Hamilton's detractors are accusing him of engaging in an unholy alliance with allegedly rapacious Jews who together are going to use their superior knowledge of finance to bilk ordinary citizens and veterans and soil tillers.

Hamilton, despite this opposition, does manage to enact his economic agenda. And it's not surprising that while many of Hamilton's contemporaries were fearful of his vision of America's future, Jews who were immigrants, who were transients, who were cosmopolitans, who were traders, who were financiers, welcomed this broadminded economic agenda that he pursued and Hamilton



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working with Jews and Gentiles who were like-minded helps create the economic foundations upon which America's political experiment and self-government might have a chance of enduring.

The last aspect of Hamilton's career that I'll mention briefly, where we see this residue of a probable Jewish heritage is in his legal practice. Although he's remembered today principally as treasury secretary, he was arguably the premier litigator of the New York Bar, both before and after he served as treasury secretary. And in this capacity, he is in many respects the go to lawyer for New York's Jewish community. And in fact, he uses the courtroom as a platform to fulminate against anti-Semitism. His witnesses in a particularly famous case are accused of lying purely on the basis of the fact that they're Jews and Hamilton uses this occasion to issue the most robust denunciation of Jew hatred to pass the lips of any American founder.

**Liz Covart:**

[00:43:40](#)

I know you're a scholar of early America, but I wonder if we could press you on your timeline a bit. What you're talking about in terms of the prejudice against Jews and the anti-Semitic attacks against Hamilton in the 1780s and 1790s made claims that Jews are usurious, that they're always involved with money, they're out to hurt people and that they're transient. And these are prejudices that really carry on into the 20th and 21st centuries. We see a lot of this talk, especially in Russia with its pilgrims, and in Nazi-controlled World War II Germany. Can you tell us where these prejudices against Jews came from and how they developed and how they made their way to North America?

**Andrew Porwancher:**

[00:44:21](#)

Liz, this is another really interesting question. And I defer here to perhaps our greatest scholar of anti-Semitism, Deborah Lipstadt, who is renowned for her work on Holocaust denial, who's been portrayed by the irrepressible Rachel Weisz on screen. She's a phenomenal scholar and she makes an argument that I find really compelling, which is that this dates all the way back to antiquity. This dates back to Jesus and the money lenders in the temple. And we see throughout European history, these stereotypes about Jews and money and Jews being animated by purely pecuniary interests, as being immoral. This predates Hamilton by many centuries and it postdates him as well. It is one of the most enduring motifs in Jewish history.



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Part of the reason why this stereotype has had such purchase on the Gentile imagination is because Jews are and have been disproportionately represented in activities like finance, not out of some desire to seize the reins of financial power and dupe their Gentile neighbors, but because Jews are shunted into these professions by virtue of their marginality. In many societies where power was rooted in land, Jews could not own land. Jews had to become tradespeople, intermediaries between societies. They had to develop acumen in commerce and in languages in order to survive. And then they're punished for their success. They are stigmatized for having made a living in the very professions that they're confined to.

So this is the challenge that Jews in Hamilton's day face. In many places, if you were a Jew in the early years of the Republic, you couldn't become a lawyer. You couldn't, as I mentioned, be in the state legislature. You couldn't necessarily become a professor at many institutions. But you could become a merchant and you could become a trader. And so there is a real willful obtuseness on the part of contemporary anti-Semites to acknowledge that Jews are doing the best they can under difficult circumstances that they themselves did not create. And the longevity and the tenacity of these stereotypes is a really interesting historical subject. And it is discouraging that we've seen that staying power endure into the 21st century.

**Liz Covart:**                    [00:47:13](#)

Thank you for taking us all the way back to antiquity. I knew we would have to travel far back in time, I don't think I thought we were going that far back in time. Now I know we heard you say that you believe Alexander Hamilton did more than any other founder to promote the Jewish cause and to include Jews in the new United States government. Could you tell us more about early American's willingness or unwillingness to include Jews in their civil society and government? You said inclusion really varied a lot from state to state and region to region.

**Andrew Porwancher:**   [00:47:45](#)

I want to be really clear Liz, that when I talk about the staying power of contemporary anti-Semitism, it was not at all the case that there were no Gentiles who supported Jewish rights. And in fact, it's inconceivable that Jews could have made advances in their rights in the early Republic, but for the support of more enlightened Gentiles who were in a position where they could have



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consolidated power for Christians and yet chose to advance a more pluralistic vision of American democracy.

And so one example we find is in George Washington. George Washington is a deeply ecumenical figure when it comes to American religious life. I think Washington appreciates as much as anyone that America is a nation of many different faiths and the tensions between say, Baptist and Catholics and Presbyterians, would've been much more fractious then than they are today, to say nothing of say the Jewish community.

And so Washington understands that if America's experiment in self-government is going to endure, there has to be a precedent for tolerance and a number of embattled religious sects, including Baptists, Catholics, and yes, Jews, write to George Washington in the early days of the Republic when he's president, seeking affirmation that they too can claim some stake in this new Republic, that they're not there by some sort of mere provisional toleration, but that they are in fact, full-fledged participants in this American experiment.

And it's in that context that George Washington writes his famous letter to the Jews of Newport in 1790, in which he becomes the first head of state anywhere in the world to acknowledge Jews as citizens. And he says famously that the government of the United States gives to bigotry, no sanction. To persecution, no assistance. And drawing language from the Book of Micah, he tells his Jewish correspondents that in this new Republic, everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make them afraid. And this sets a critical precedent at the time when the power of precedent was at its zenith because no one had been president of the United States before.

And it is in that context where we see both at the federal level with the following year, the ratification of the Bill of Rights, including the Free Exercise Clause in the First Amendment, where we see advances at the state level, including Jews and erasing civil distinctions between Jews and Gentiles. The progress takes a while and Jews continue to have to battle cultural stigma, but there is a trajectory towards inclusion that begins with Gentiles like Washington and others, Hamilton if you want to include him. I know he's in this liminal zone between Gentile and Jew.



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And so there's always been a battle between those who say that America is a Christian nation and others are to be at best merely tolerated, and those who see America from its inception as a non-sectarian country, where each is free to worship according to the dictates of their conscience. The tension between those two countervailing forces throughout American history sometimes flares up, sometimes it dies down. Hopefully over the long arc of history, we move in the direction of liberality. But I think when you step back and look at it from the Jewish perspective at least, America has been as good to the Jews, if not quite perfect, more so than almost any other country in the world.

**Liz Covart:** [00:51:48](#)

You talked about these precedents set by Alexander Hamilton and George Washington who went out and advocated for Jews, that they were trying to get everyone to see who Jews were and include them as full-fledged citizens in the new United States. But we also know that these processes of inclusion take time in American culture and in American constitutional history. So when do you think that assumption that Jews are part of the United States as full-fledged citizens and that they're part of individual states as full-fledged citizens there, when do you think these ideas become really embedded in American culture? How long did it take for Washington's words to really seep into American culture and law?

**Andrew Porwancher:** [00:52:32](#)

I think we can point to three moments and then one phase. The three moments are the ratification of the Constitution, which in 1788 bans religious tests for office, it's really a radical advance for religious freedom by the standards of the day, considering that most states had enacted constitutional provisions for themselves, banning Jews from elected office.

The second moment I would say is the Newport letter, where you have the head of state, George Washington, a singular figure in the respect that he garners among Americans, sending an unequivocal signal that Jews are full participants in this American democracy. The third moment in 1791 with the ratification of the Free Exercise Clause.

And then the phase I would say is the next 80 years or so over which states continue to promulgate restrictions on Jews, whether it's serving in a state legislature, whether there's questions about whether Jews can testify under oath. And it's really not until the



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1870s, that the last of these civil restrictions are removed against Jews. And even then you still have a cultural anti-Semitism that can sometimes run up against legal forms of equality. And so the Leo Frank Case in early 20th century Georgia is a notorious example where a Jewish man under very dubious evidence had been incarcerated for a rape and murder that any reasonable jury would've acquitted him for. And he's effectively seized by a mob and lynched because they either won't wait for a court to do justice or fear that a court won't do justice as they define justice. And so that's a good example where even though Jews have protection under the law technically, that only counts for so much in a culture that's rotted with anti-Semitism.

That is a story that perhaps continues to the present day. Are there implicit biases that may prejudice a jury against a particular defendant? Are there ways in which our justice system is not as blind as the letter of the law would have it? These are interesting questions as a historian that are beyond the scope of my study, but I would be unsurprised if it turned out that there are certain kinds of cases, perhaps things like white collar cases that play into stereotypes where the reality of legal forms of equality may only tell us so much of a more complicated story where prejudice continues to play an active part.

**Liz Covart:** [00:55:30](#)

Andrew, before we move into the Time Warp, how do you think incorporating Alexander Hamilton's Jewish education and his affinity for Judaism changes the way we think, or perhaps rethink, Hamilton's motivations and inspirations as a Founding Father?

**Andrew Porwancher:** [00:55:47](#)

In Hamilton's lifetime and beyond, he was routinely derided as a lackey of the moneyed elite, as someone who held ordinary people in contempt and because the musical has been so successful at reviving his reputation on a global scale, I think a lot of people don't realize that Hamilton was in many quarters, a loathed figure in his day and has often been a punching bag for historians, even in the modern era. I think that Hamilton's relationship with the people and faith of Judaism complicates this conventional depiction of Hamilton as some sort of anti-democratic caricature.

To be sure, Hamilton was not a populist firebrand. None of the founders were. No one believed in some sort of pure mass democracy, but neither was Hamilton this lackey of rich Gentiles as



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so many of his adversaries like to claim that he was. In fact, Hamilton routinely aligns himself with a Jewish community that is legally and culturally marginalized and his willingness to repudiate anti-Semitism so fulsomely, to push for advances in Jewish rights in a political climate that's often inhospitable to those advances, it should all push us to seek a more textured, more nuanced Hamilton, to recover Hamilton with the full complexity that the historical record demands of us.

**Liz Covart:**                    [00:57:33](#)

As you were talking, I was just thinking about how thinking about Hamilton as an advocate for Jews really highlights and allows us to view an area of the early Republic's history that we just don't normally pay attention to, and that's its Jewish history.

**Andrew Porwancher:**   [00:57:48](#)

I'm glad you brought that up, Liz. Jewish history about the United States tends to focus on the 1880s to the present because that is when you have this massive Jewish wave of immigration coming to the New World. And yet there's this incredibly rich history in the early Republic that has often been overlooked. And I want to acknowledge that there are a number of scholars who have done really great work on Jews in early America, but there's not very many of us, maybe half a dozen at most, who have worked on this topic in the last 10 or 20 years. So even though the number of Jews is marginal, the limited number of Jews has never been a very reliable index of the importance of Jews in society. Partly because Jews have managed to take on outsized roles of import in various cultures in which they find themselves and partly because the Jewish question, as it's known, the question of what will Jews' civil status be in society, takes on broader significance than just Jews alone.

When this first Jewish community comes to New Amsterdam in 1654, the governor, Peter Stuyvesant, wants to kick these Jews out. And he says to the authorities back in Holland, "If I take in the Jews, I'm going to have to take in all of these different religious dissenters." Now he was wrong on the morality, but he was right on the facts because once you create a space for Jews to exist peacefully with their Christian neighbors, it creates a domino effect where freedom is going to spread. And with exceptions, with occasional U-turns, with moments of tension, Peter Stuyvesant's fear, which was the Jewish dream, ultimately does become realized over the ensuing 350 years.





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**Liz Covart:** [00:59:56](#)

Now we should proceed into the Time Warp. This is a fun segment of the show where we ask you a hypothetical history question about what might have happened if something had occurred differently, or if someone had acted differently.

In your opinion, what might have happened if Alexander Hamilton had openly acknowledged and embraced his Jewish heritage? How might his role as a founder of the United States have been different? And would he have had the opportunities to shape the United States that he had in his identity as a Christian?

**Andrew Porwancher:** [01:00:46](#)

I have never been asked it before, so I'm excited to engage with a totally new line of inquiry. If Hamilton had been a professing Jew in the United States, I suspect that he would've still been able to contribute meaningfully to the American Revolution. There were Jewish officers in the Continental Army. By the way, that was not allowed in the British Army. However, Hamilton would not have become treasury secretary. It's almost inconceivable at that time that a Jew would've been put into a position of such influence. This is not to say that George Washington was anti-Semitic. He was not, but there were political realities of the time and Hamilton's Jewish identity would've precluded seizing the reins of state power.

He could have still used his commercial acumen to make a life for himself in a place like New York City in finance, in trade. He would probably struggle to have a legal career in the 1780s. There isn't a Jewish lawyer until the very end of Hamilton's life in New York City. So his opportunities professionally, certainly his opportunities to become one of the iconic figures in American history, would've been limited. It is ironic that Hamilton has to abandon any Jewish identity he might have had to gain the stature in his American adulthood to then become an outspoken champion of equality for Jews. If Hamilton's advocacy on the part of American Jewry speaks to the possibilities for Jewish life in the new Republic, the fact that he had to be a Christian to advance those ideas, suggest the limitations in a society still tainted by the vestiges of Old World bigotry.

**Liz Covart:** [01:02:51](#)

So what aspect of history are you researching and writing about now Andrew? Do you have a new research project in the works?



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**Andrew Porwancher:** [01:02:58](#)

I have two new research projects. I'm really excited about both of them. Thank you for asking. The first one is called the "Prophet of Harvard Law". And this book should be out early this fall, and it is a intellectual biography of James Bradley Thayer. And if this is a name you don't know, you can be forgiven because no one's ever done a book about him before, but he should be a name that people know because when he was a professor at Harvard Law in the latter quarter of the 19th century, he became a mentor to almost every single person who would go on to become an iconic judge in the pantheon of the federal bench. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Louis Brandeis, Learned Hand, the most influential names, people who penned judicial opinions that are still good law today, learned at Thayer's feet. Before they were famous justices and judges, they were impressionable young students in their twenties, and they internalized this philosophy from James Bradley Thayer. And then later in life translate it into actual legal doctrine that's impacted the lives and liberties of millions of Americans.

And my other project is called "Theodore Roosevelt and the Jews". And this is a project that in many ways is animated by the same central concern that drives the Hamilton book, the question of Jewish belonging in America. And yet it is in so many respects, a distinct project. Theodore Roosevelt is definitely not a Jew. My book will not be outing him as having had all of this Jewish ancestry and a Hebrew school education. He's very much a Christian and yet Roosevelt forms a really close relationship and a really complicated relationship with American Jewry. At the very time that Roosevelt becomes president, America is emerging on the world's stage as one of the great powers and it's happening at precisely the moment that the pogroms in Russia that you mentioned earlier Liz, those pogroms are making the plight of Jewry a major issue in global diplomacy. And more than anyone could have imagined when Roosevelt takes office, Jewish issues and Jewish people become central to his presidency, they become central to his diplomacy. And this book, which I hope will be out in the next couple years will be the first to tell that story.

**Liz Covart:** [01:05:23](#)

And what if we have more questions about the Jewish World of Alexander Hamilton? How can we reach you?

**Andrew Porwancher:** [01:05:28](#)

You can reach me, my email is [porwancher@ou.edu](mailto:porwancher@ou.edu). My website is [andrewporwancher.com](http://andrewporwancher.com), where you can find descriptions and links



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to my books. And you can also find my email address, which is on there. And I love getting emails from people. I'd love to hear from you, so please do reach out.

**Liz Covart:** [01:05:49](#) Andrew Porwancher, thank you for spending time with us and for helping us investigate the Jewish World of Alexander Hamilton.

**Andrew Porwancher:** [01:05:56](#) Thank you so much. It's been really fun.

**Liz Covart:** [01:05:59](#) We don't often talk about the Jewish history of the United States much before the 1880s, but there is a rich and vibrant history of Jews in North America and the Caribbean that extends back into the 17th century. As Andrew related, one way that we can view this early American Jewish history is to look at the life and experiences of Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton's early life and education in Nevis' Jewish community is something that stayed with him throughout the rest of his life. And we can see this in the many ways that Hamilton worked to represent, defend, and include Jews in the new United States' political and civil life. Forbidden by the laws of New York from becoming lawyers in the 1780s and 1790s, Hamilton stood up for Jews in court and represented their interests when they had need of it.

Hamilton also used his early Jewish education and his formative work experience as a clerk in a Saint Croix mercantile firm to see the world in an expansive way. Not only did Hamilton's world include Jews, it also saw the possibilities of international involvement and trade. The Caribbean Hamilton grew up in was an international place. It was a place that valued trade and interacting with people all over the Atlantic world. Hamilton saw firsthand how developing an international market for trade and connecting with people from all around the Atlantic world could lead to great wealth and economic prosperity.

Whether Hamilton knew it or not, this international outlook was also a part of his Jewish education. As Andrew noted, forced from Spain and Portugal for their non-Christian beliefs, Jews set out and settled across the Atlantic world, where they established a new world that valued trade and commerce, the very trades and areas of work where Jews were allowed to participate and flourish. As a result, Jews did a lot of the work necessary to turn the Caribbean into a thriving international entrepôt and marketplace. Hamilton



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saw the benefits of this international and marketplace firsthand and he tried to recreate them for the United States as its first secretary of the treasury.

Now, not everyone in the United States agreed with Hamilton's expansive views on trade in the economy or with his ideas that Jews should be included as equal members and citizens of the United States. In fact, as we discussed with Andrew, it took the American people a very long time, 80 to 100 years, to really start recognizing and protecting the inclusion of Jews in American society and politics. And even still, a lot of the same prejudices that Hamilton and his Jewish friends faced in the 1780s and 1790s still have some life in them today, but the hope and promise of Hamilton's time, that if you create a space for Jews and peoples of other religious faiths to live and exist peacefully alongside one another, you will have created an environment where you have religious toleration and many bright ingrained ideas that can help expand the cultural, economic, and political fortunes of the United States and its society.

You'll find more information about Andrew, his book, *The Jewish World of Alexander Hamilton*, plus notes, links, and a transcript for everything we talked about today, all in the show notes page, [benfranklinworld.com/335](http://benfranklinworld.com/335).

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