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“...and Peggy!”
Macie Bridge

In August of 2015, *Hamilton: An American Musical* took Broadway by storm. The musical was written by the talented Lin-Manuel Miranda, inspired by Ron Chernow’s biography *Alexander Hamilton*. Performed entirely in rap and song, the musical touched the hearts of millions of people, thanks to modern platforms such as Spotify and iTunes, as fans were able to listen to it from start to finish within the comfort of their own homes. Fans fell in love with the characters and became fascinated with the lives of these 18th century historical figures. I, begrudgingly, found myself among them. After many futile attempts, my best friend finally got me hooked on the soundtrack a full year after it had hit Broadway. I was resistant at first, as I typically am with any fad, as I had never met one that hadn’t been a waste of my time. Much to my dismay, my curiosity and love for American history eventually broke me down. I watched myself in awe as the music gave me mood swings, going from hilariously funny to somber and serious in one song. I couldn’t believe I had fallen into the fandom I had sworn I never would! It would be a lie to say I wasn’t slightly disappointed in myself, but before I knew it, I had the first act memorized and never looked back. I was obsessed with learning the story.

The first characters I met were “The Schuyler Sisters”: Eliza, Hamilton’s future wife; Angelica, the brilliant older sister and mentor; and Peggy, the little sister who is almost forgotten. As the sisters take on the stage -Angelica in coral, Eliza in green, and Peggy in yellow- all attention is drawn to them. They “adventure” through the streets of Manhattan, dreaming about how great the revolution will be. The choreography, lyrics and stage directions continue to progress, and the audience’s eyes and ears follow Angelica and Eliza, only to remember Peggy’s presence when she shouts her cutesy line “... and Peggy!”, coming close to being drowned out by her sisters. Introduced briefly through this line, I could tell Peggy was sassy, but she disappears in the second act, meaning I never got to know her as well as I did her older sisters. Peggy is now a famous and beloved character among *Hamilton* fans, but the reality is that nobody really knows anything about her; at least not from the show. I could assume she had a little spunk thanks to her one-liner, but other than that she was simply a member of the Schuyler family. As I thought about this more, I realized that the characters in *Hamilton* were *real* people, so Peggy must have had more to her life than simply shouting out her name to remind people she was there too- I am convinced of that. With this in mind, I set out to learn as much as I could about Peggy. While I hoped to find some more details about the events in her life, my main goal was to piece together her character. Who *was* she? As I began my research, the only description I could have given about Peggy was that she was pretty, sassy, and maybe a little ditsy as a result of the other two. I think you will find that I am very proud of the real Peggy I uncovered.

The very first thing I learned about Peggy is that she was very rarely actually called Peggy. Her real name at birth was Margaret, but many also referred to her as ‘Margarita’. Peggy was a nickname that I only found mentioned in a few of my sources, but since I know and love her as Peggy, I’ll continue to use this nickname.

Peggy was born on September 25th, 1758, to General Philip Schuyler and his wife, Catherine in Albany, NY. Although she was the third child, Peggy’s birth actually marked the first period of more than a few weeks that Catherine and Philip were able to spend together since their marriage in 1755, due to Philip serving in the French and Indian War (Humphreys 61). She grew up with eight siblings: her two older sisters, Angelica and Elizabeth, and younger siblings

John, Rensselaer, Philip, Cornelia, Cortlandt and Catherine. The Schuylers were a Dutch family, and therefore attended the Dutch Reformed Church in Albany. There is not much description of Peggy's childhood detailed in any sources I was able to find; however, from what I've gathered, she had a comfortable one, spent largely at the family's estate in Albany with her mother and siblings. As a result of her father's involvement in the French and Indian War, and because of its proximity to her home, there were some minor disruptions to the Schuyler household during her early years, but nothing largely impactful. Peggy was able to receive a basic education from her mother, and received training in domestic skills, alongside her sisters (Gerlach, 129).

For the sake of chronology, it's important to point out an event that would later have a major impact on Peggy's life in multiple ways: the elopement of her older sister Angelica to John Barker Church in 1777. Elopements were a cause for quite a bit of scandal back then, but Angelica was worried her father would not approve of Church, so she did it anyway. It did upset the family, but soon blew over, which was uncommon for that day and age. The family's quick forgiveness was certainly noted by Peggy. Peggy also clearly noticed Stephen Van Rensselaer III, who was just a 13 year old distant cousin at the time. Their introduction may have been uneventful, if not awkward, but it was not insignificant. Oh, but you will have to wait a little bit longer to see where this plot point goes, as we catch up to it later down the line. In the meantime, we will continue on the search for Peggy's true character (Humphreys, 193).

It wasn't until I began to delve into Peggy's later years that I started to see her personality come through. In fact, I stumbled upon a Peggy anecdote much faster than I had anticipated, and was thrilled to find what it revealed about her. It was the summer of 1782, and Peggy was 24 years old. There had been multiple attempts at this point by the British (with the help of Indian Allies) to capture her father, with his prominent position of General in the Revolutionary War, so the family had six guards around the house for protection. Peggy's oldest sister Angelica was visiting with her new son, Philip, and when the guards went on break one day she had removed the guns from the house so Philip wouldn't touch them. Of course, this was when the Indians attacked, and the family ran upstairs to try to protect themselves and their father while the guards fumbled around for their guns. Peggy was the one who realized they left baby Philip downstairs, so she snuck down to try to save him (Humphreys 194).

According to Chernow's *Alexander Hamilton*, the leader of the raiding party tried to block her path with his musket, and when he demanded she tell him where her father was, the "cool headed Peggy" responded with " 'Gone to alarm the town.' " This response incited enough fear in the intruder that he fled the site. However, as the invaders fled and Peggy was making her escape up the stairs with the baby, an Indian hurled a tomahawk at her head. It barely missed her, and instead left a dent in the wall, which can reportedly still be seen at the site today (Chernow, 160). While this story was largely passed down through word of mouth in the family, and therefore may not be entirely accurate, it reveals so much about Peggy. All of a sudden, she has character: she is brave and heroic and witty. At the same time, Peggy's family seemed to take this act of heroism lightly, and at face value as simply a good story. This makes me wonder how Peggy felt- was she underwhelmed by a lack of praise and acknowledgment, and offended by the lighthearted nature the story took on? I have to imagine that she was, but in an effort to maintain her dignity and proper image, never spoke up about it aside from a few passive aggressive comments, and a turned up nose whenever it was mentioned.

The next place I was able to discover more of Peggy's character was yet another unexpected source: letters from Hamilton himself. As I began to work my way through these letters, it started to make sense to me that I would find some of Peggy in them - *Hamilton* the

musical does cover the fact that he was a passionate and fervent writer. One of the letters I found was written from Hamilton to Peggy's sister Elizabeth, his then fiancée, on October 5, 1780. At this point in time, Hamilton had yet to meet Peggy in person, but was making attempts to get to know her through letters. In it, he was telling Eliza about a "piece" he was writing. It was to be called "*the way to get him*, for the benefit of all single ladies who desire to be married," and he wanted Eliza to ask Peggy to take part in it, and be his main character. Apparently from what he knows of her, as they have not met in person, she will "have no objections". This makes me ask what kind of descriptions of Peggy the family was using if this is what Alexander assumed about her. While I don't know what Peggy's response to this request was, I imagine her with a satisfied smirk on her face. I have so far gathered that Peggy was not only confident but a rule bender, as I do not believe that subjecting yourself to such a piece would be considered very ladylike by 1780 standards. This also confirmed for me a character trait mentioned in a few other sources: Peggy was charming. Clearly, the tales of this trait had found their way back to Hamilton.

The second letter was written from Hamilton directly to Peggy, on January 21st, 1781. At this point in time, Alexander and Elizabeth had been married for just over a month. In this particular letter, I have found yet another funny narrative. Alexander was offering Peggy relationship advice. Apparently, Eliza had been writing her sister to tell her how wonderful married life was and encouraging her to also pursue marriage. Alexander figured Peggy could use his two cents, as well. He tells her not to take Eliza too seriously, because marriage is a major commitment, and to "Get a man of sense, not ugly enough to be pointed at—with some good-nature—a few grains of feeling—a little taste—a little imagination—and above all a good deal of decision to keep you in order; for that I foresee will be no easy task." Reading this over, my suspicions that Peggy was quite the free spirit are confirmed. Knowing she had a witty personality, I also imagine what Peggy's reaction to such implications from her brother-in-law would be. I can't help but picture a carefully worded response, with an underlying layer of what is currently referred to as "salty". She would, of course, be slightly offended at relationship advice from anyone, as she was quite the independent lady for her time., but from the brother-in-law she has never met... heaven forbid.

After learning this, it was no shock to me when I learned that Peggy had eloped. Peggy was 25 at the time, and as though eloping didn't cause a scandal enough, her husband was both 6 years younger than her, and a distant cousin. And yes, your suspicions are correct; she married the previously mentioned Stephen Van Rensselaer III, the eighth patroon of Rensselaerwyck and the largest landowner in New York state, on June 6, 1783 (Chernow 161). From what I have read, I must assume that Peggy watched Angelica elope so many years before, observed how her family did not reject her, and decided to take the chance herself. She probably spent hours convincing Stephen to ignore what his conscience was telling him, and to go along with her plan. Knowing what I do of Peggy, she had the confidence and the looks to easily convince anyone of anything, so the man who was already head over heels for her would have been an easy victim.

Although the marriage worked out for the best in the end, it certainly was not taken lightly. This is obvious as it was brought up in a letter between two of Stephen's mutual friends, Harrison Otis and Killian Rensselaer: "Stephen's precipitate marriage has been to me a source of surprise and indeed of regret. He certainly is too young to enter into a connection of this kind;...our friend has indulged the momentary impulse of youthful passions, and has yielded to the dictates of remorseful fancy" (Humphreys 195). Despite this, the couple was very quickly forgiven, largely due to their now combined wealth and social position.

Peggy is described as a beautiful and charming wife, which is a similar description to what I had been finding; however as I researched this elopement story further, I stumbled upon a very antithetical description of Peggy. According to Chernow's biography, "Peggy was very beautiful but vain and supercilious." As shocked as I was to read this, I was also excited at this discovery: although it may be unflattering, these details about her true character are exactly what I had hoped to find in my research. Vain and supercilious are not character traits I ever would have picked up from the musical. Maybe the "cutesy" mannerisms she put forward were all part of her vanity. And where did this vanity come from? Perhaps it was inspired by jealousy, as her sisters began to claim the fame in her family, and she faded into the background. As I put the pieces of the puzzle together, Peggy's personality was starting to take shape.

One of the final anecdotes I found on Peggy from her married life reveals yet another aspect of her bold and sassy personality. Since Peggy and Stephen were a couple that held a considerable social position, they attended many formal events and balls. One of these balls in 1789 happened to be attended by Hamilton and Eliza, and Angelica, who was visiting home for a few months after having moved to England with her husband. Angelica and Hamilton had always had an interesting kind of chemistry, and it was often speculated that if Angelica wasn't married, he would have proposed to her instead of Eliza. Regardless, it is recorded that at this ball Angelica dropped a garter, which was "swept gallantly off the floor by Hamilton." As Angelica teased him that he "wasn't a Knight of the Garter", Peggy remarked that "He would be a Knight of the Bedchamber, if he could." (Chernow, 282) Apparently this sarcastic one-liner from Peggy fed quite a bit of material to local gossips who heard her. I had to laugh as I read this. Peggy often did fade into the background as a wife and sister, however she seems to be the type to every once and awhile throw out a zinger to remind people of her presence- perhaps then the line "...and Peggy!" is not as completely inaccurate as I thought it was. Was this sarcastic comment inspired by jealousy? Or was it the desperate cry of her vanity to be noticed?

Later that year, Peggy gave birth to her first and only child, Stephen van Rensselaer IV. Before his birth, Peggy and Stephen had spent the many years after their honeymoon taking care of the Schuyler estate in Albany, and were largely settled there (Humphreys 196). With both of her parents coming and going, they relied on Peggy to run the household and take care of her younger siblings. I was able to find very little other information on this period of her life, and so I think it is safe to say her final decade was spent very busy running such a large household, and raising her own son. From what I can tell from her parent's biographies, Peggy was the rock of the household during this time, and was responsible for the "behind the scenes" functioning of the family- a role I assume required quite a bit of strength and patience. At this point, Peggy was so much more than the cute and sassy girl I knew from the musical. She was tough and had grit. Although I would like to know, I am unsure if she took the role willingly to hold up her parent's family, along with her own, or out of duty. Either way, it shows high moral character, along with a strength I never would have thought she had.

Unfortunately, Peggy passed away at the young age of 43. She fell ill in 1799, and her condition steadily worsened until she passed away in March of 1801. At the time, Hamilton happened to be in Albany on business. Upon Peggy's request, he stayed with her for a few days, and was able to be there as a comfort to the family at her passing. Throughout his stay Hamilton wrote consistent letters to Eliza, informing her of her sister's condition, and when Peggy passed he sent the following:

"On Saturday, My Dear Eliza, your sister took leave of her sufferings and friends, I trust, to find repose and happiness in a better country. Viewing all that she had endured for so

long a time, I could not but feel a relief in the termination of the scene. She was sensible to the last and resigned to the important change. Your father and mother are now calm. All is as well as it can be; except the dreadful ceremonies which custom seems to have imposed as indispensable in this place, and which at every instant open anew the closing wounds of bleeding hearts. Tomorrow the funeral takes place. The day after I hope to set sail for N York. I long to come to console and comfort you my darling Betsey. Adieu my sweet angel. Remember the duty of Christian Resignation.” (Chernow 641)

When I read this letter, it made my heart heavy. I have come to know such an amazing, complex and strong Peggy, so hearing of her in a painful, compromised state is certainly saddening. However, it is no surprise to me that she was at peace with the idea of death; being such a strong woman, she must have had great faith. Either that, or she was too stubborn to admit any fear to anyone.

In the end, I learned exactly what I had hoped I would learn about Peggy: that is, she was nothing like I had originally thought she was. I didn't learn much about the events of her childhood, her experiences being married, or the story of raising her son, but what I did uncover is much richer. I discovered who Margaret “Peggy” Schuyler van Rensselaer *was*. She may have appeared cute and sassy, but she was also confident and collected, brave and charming, vain, and a lot of witty. She was not afraid to be different, and certainly did not put much effort into fitting into the proper “box” society would have liked her in. As she grew older she became bitter, and could be passive aggressive when she needed to be, but stood with a dignity that defined her. She had little care for what others thought of her, but still maintained a charismatic and responsible persona. She was also strong, and put others needs before her own, even when it may have been hard, especially when it came to family. To put it simply, Peggy Schuyler was human. She holds both good and bad, and was so much more than a cute one-liner on a Broadway stage.

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