Alexander Hamilton's Legal Character in the Making: An Analysis of Rutgers v. Waddington (1784) and People v. Croswell (1804)

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Research Question: How did Hamilton’s legal character, federalist political principles, and moral values impact the American legal system as it emerged out of the shadow of English tradition with the court rulings of Rutgers v. Waddington (1784) and People v. Croswell (1804)?

Introduction: Although the origins of the American legal system go back to medieval English common law, the American and English legal systems are not identical. Significant differences between these two systems emerged in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries as influential legal and political thinkers within the thirteen British North American colonies and early United States established American-specific precedents in government and the law.

Alexander Hamilton’s involvement in two notable New York court cases, Rutgers v. Waddington (1784) and People v. Croswell (1804), showcase these intersecting characteristics of Hamilton’s legal thought: his values; his preferred legal principles; and his thoughts on the future of the United States. These aspects of Hamilton’s legal thought were the core components of his “legal character.” Thus, this case study explores how this profoundly shaped American law as they speak directly to the gradual detachment of American and English legal traditions in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries.

Background: Hamilton’s early life, adversities, and challenges determined many of his lasting values and much of his personal character. Hamilton was born on the British Caribbean’s island of Nevis in 1755 where he had a difficult upbringing as he was virtually left to his own devices. At a young age, Hamilton found work in an import and export business called Cregrin, where he apprenticed under a New Hampshire merchant who used to be his mother’s landlord. As an apprentice and proxy, Hamilton zealously administered many large commercial activities and profitable ventures.

In 1772, a hurricane devastated Nevis and left the island in absolute ruin. Hamilton witnessed immense death and despair, which prompted him to write a letter that was published in a local newspaper. When the island residents discovered the brilliant writer was the young Hamilton, the locals consolidated enough wealth to send him to America to become educated. He enrolled in Kings College in New York City and, soon after, joined the American Revolution War as an artillery company leader. By 1777, he was General George Washington’s aide.

Because of his combat experience in the battle of Yorktown (1781), Hamilton became a venerated war hero. He also qualified for a veteran’s exemption from the requirement that aspiring attorneys complete an apprenticeship to practicing lawyer. He studied independently for only six months and passed an oral bar exam in 1782. Hamilton then rose to become the leader of the New York Bar on the basis of his charisma, exceptional oratory and argumentative skills, and decorated veteran status. Hamilton took on many criminal cases, mostly felonies.

Simultaneously, he found significant financial success through his lucrative civil practice, which involved representing merchants, wealthy families with contested wills, and maritime insurance companies. According to biographer Hoffer, Cregrin, Hamilton was especially talented in the York as a thriving city, where he “had profited from the city’s growth and could work himself to a towering passion that held listeners enthralled.”

Method: Consulted several historiographical works and analyzed key cases handled by Hamilton during the tumultuous period of the Articles of Confederation and the Early Republic, which served as case studies analogous to the development of the American legal system.

Rutgers v. Waddington (1784): Significant resentment-toward loyalist Tories had persisted among the newly-independent Americans at the end of the Revolution. The loyalists were publicly ridiculed, beaten by Patriot gangs, tarred and feathered, and forced to have their property seized. New York enacted legislation that stripped Tories of their property rights and privileges, which, most notably, was the 1783 Trespass Act. The act gave Patriots the legal right to sue anyone who had occupied, damaged, or destroyed homes that they left behind British lines during the war, setting the stage for Rutgers v. Waddington.

The plaintiff in the case was a pro-revolution woman, Elizabeth Rutgers, who ran a family-owned brewery and alehouse. She was forced to abandon her business and flee from the state after the British occupation of New York in 1776. Two years later, a couple of British merchants, Benjamin Waddington and Evelyn Pierrepont, took over the brewery at the prompting of the British Army and appointed Joshua Waddington—a hardcore loyalist—as his supervisor. She filed suit in the Mayor’s Court of New York, demanding eight thousand pounds in back rent from the defendant, Waddington—approximately $1,897,756.66 today.

The overall issue was that, under a punitive New York state law, Waddington was liable, but the 1783 Treaty of Paris’ provisions on protecting loyalists’ property rights contradicted this. Hamilton contended the Trespass Act violated the 1783 peace treaty that was ratified in the United States, unicameral Congress. Although Hamilton was keenly aware on how unpopular the loyalist cause was, Hamilton foresaw the consequences of persecuting New York Tories, a group who had a lot of intellectual capital and property, in the young nation. Ultimately, New York’s Mayor’s Court handed down a split decision that resulted in the Rutgers being entitled to the rent only from before the British occupation, set a precedent for the supremacy of Congressional legal authority over the states, and laid the groundwork for the legal doctrine of judicial review.

Significance: Hamilton’s positions in Rutgers v. Waddington anticipated later American legal and constitutional developments. Notably, they laid the groundwork for the Supremacy Clause (Article VI, Paragraph 2) of the United States Constitution, which holds federal law superior to state law.

Moreover, Hamilton’s staunch opposition to putting state law over treaty law set a state precedent that later influenced Chief Justice John Marshall’s Supreme Court decisions in McCulloch v. Maryland (1819) and Gibbons v. Ogden (1824). Hamilton also legitimized the idea of a strong central government that overaw state status as a lesser sovereignty through this case.

Tarring & Feathering of Tories

According to Peter Charles Hoffer, “The results of Hamilton’s victory were the rebirth of New York as a much stronger national union, and an example of judicial review nearly twenty years before the more celebrated case of Marbury v. Madison asserted this right for federal courts.”

Furthermore, the emergence of “Hamiltonian constitutionalism,” as a result of the case’s ruling, later influenced broad interpretation of the federal sovereignty’s powers to meet the needs of the young nation with certain limits. Thus, the formation of Hamilton’s core ideas for the future of the nation and its legal system is discernible in Rutgers v. Waddington.

People v. Croswell (1804): The case centered around the defendant, Harry Croswell, who was a Federalist journalist. Allegedly, Croswell made defamatory comments toward public officials and President Thomas Jefferson prior to his election to presidency. He was charged with criminal libel and was initially convicted in the in a low-level district court. The jury was told Hamilton was asked only to consider whether Croswell had been the one to publish the statement under a pseudonym, which was controversial.

Croswell appealed the decision to the Supreme Court of New York and argued that truthful statements ought not to be considered defamatory, regardless of the context.

Hamilton made a six-hour speech on behalf of Croswell to the judges citing procedural errors and that “the allegedly libelous statements were so substantially and materially different from what had previously been published in the newspaper not to constitute libel.”

He cited Roman law as the original source of his defense to the charges of libel, which he contended buttressed the foundation of English common law. Even so, English common law had abandoned this-defense of libel because of the Star Chamber—a medieval court that existed to punish those who were too powerful to ensure justice—rendering the English common law flawed.

The judges were deadlocked. Half of the bench sided with Hamilton and the other half was too apprehensive on discarding the English common law precedent for the Roman civil tradition. Although Hamilton won the case, the issue became legally malleable in the New York State Legislature later re- wrote Hamilton’s libel defense argument in the state’s libel law, overturning the English common law precedent under which the truthfulness of statements alone is not a defense; the federal government and many other states followed.

The case of People v. Croswell is that the case reshaped American views on defamation and adopted a new standard, where truth alone was a defense.

Significance: In People v. Croswell, Hamilton set a precedent that validated the practice of looking beyond the English common law for both creative and just solutions. Future judges would rule based on their own notions of what the law was, its intended interpretation, and which judicial precedents were relevant, essentially looking beyond English and American common law.

In the Croswell case, Hamilton cited the past interpretations of criminal libel charges to showcase how it changed, the original intent of the defamation precedent, and how it was the correct interpretation. Hamilton’s innovative approach of reviewing the original intent of a law or precedent would become the cornerstone of the American judicial system after Marbury v. Madison (1803).

Conclusion: In conclusion, Hamilton’s legal character truly does embody the changes and arguments of the American legal tradition from the previous English colonial common law tradition. Hamilton’s arguments in Rutgers v. Waddington showcase his ideas on supreme federal sovereignty and judicial review being implemented within the United States government, shaping the country’s entire political, economic, and legal system. In People v. Croswell, Hamilton legitimized lawyers and judges having broader legal interpretations.