

Alexander Hamilton

1755–1804



Alexander Hamilton was born January 11, 1755, on the British West Indies island of Nevis. His father abandoned his family in 1765. In 1768, his mother died, leaving Hamilton and his older brother, James Jr., orphans. Hamilton's mother had a son from a previous marriage; so when she died, he claimed all of her possessions. After his mother died, Hamilton's cousin, Peter Lytton adopted him. Unfortunately, Lytton committed suicide, Hamilton was abandoned again, and he and James were separated. In 1772 a hurricane destroyed the town where Hamilton lived. His letter about the hurricane was published in the *Royal Danish-American Gazette*. With the help of a local clergyman, Hamilton was able to raise enough money to move to New York in 1773 to attend Kings College (present-day Columbia University). Hamilton went on to become an army officer, a lawyer, a politician, and a Founding Father of the United States.

At the start of the Revolutionary War, Hamilton joined Hearts of Oak Militia Company and then rose to the rank of lieutenant. With the help of patriots, Alexander McDougall and John Jay, he was able to raise an arms unit of sixty men. For his bravery in such battles as Harlem Heights, he gained the interest of George Washington. Hamilton served as a personal secretary to Washington during the war. In 1777 he rode next to Washington in the battles at Brandywine, Germantown, and Monmouth. He led one of the more important and dangerous attacks against British positions at the Battle of Yorktown. Hamilton and Washington became close friends, and in 1789 President Washington appointed him the first Secretary of the Treasury.

Hamilton became the leader of the Federalist Party, one of the first political parties in the nation. He and Thomas Jefferson, the leader of the Democratic - Republican Party, were long-time political enemies. Hamilton, who rose from poverty, lobbied for the elitist class. Jefferson, who came from wealth, lobbied for the common man.

Hamilton would help Jefferson win the 1800 Presidential election over Aaron Burr. Hamilton's hatred for Burr led him to support Jefferson. The election ended in a tie in the Electoral College, and the House of Representatives, most of whom were Federalists, voted in favor of Jefferson to be president. Because he received the second greatest number of votes, Burr became vice president. This intensified a long-standing political and personal rivalry between Burr and Hamilton.

Burr resigned the vice presidency and ran for governor of New York in 1804. Burr sought the support of the Federalist Party, but Hamilton refused to support him. Burr was defeated in the gubernatorial election and blamed Hamilton for his loss. He challenged Hamilton to a duel, and they met in Weehawken, New Jersey, on July 11, 1804. Some witnesses reported Hamilton purposely fired high into the trees, but Burr took careful aim and fatally wounded Hamilton. Burr, was charged with murder in New Jersey, but returned to New York City and never was arrested for the crime.

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Discussion Questions:

1. Name three Revolutionary War battles in which Hamilton fought.
2. How did Hamilton help Jefferson win the 1800 Presidential Election over Aaron Burr?
3. What was the reason Aaron Burr challenged Hamilton to a duel?