

Name: _____

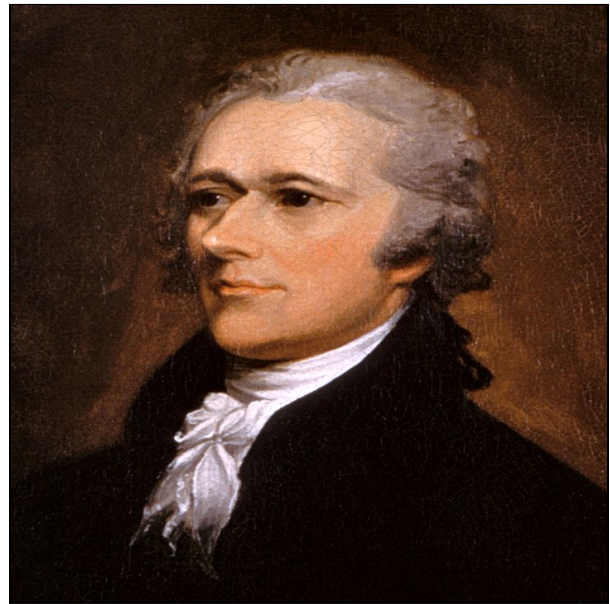
Class: _____

Alexander Hamilton

By Jessica McBirney
2017

Alexander Hamilton (1757-1804) was an American political figure and one of the Founding Fathers of the United States. In this informational text, Jessica McBirney discusses Hamilton's life and accomplishments, specifically his contributions to America's revolutionary founding and early politics. As you read, take note of Hamilton's opinions on America's government and how his opinions compared to others.

- [1] Alexander Hamilton was never one to turn down a fight. The Founding Father is best known for his deadly duel with rival Aaron Burr,¹ but was involved in close to a dozen duels in his lifetime, including one with future President James Monroe. Almost all of the arguments were resolved without any shots fired — except, of course, for his final duel. Nevertheless, Hamilton's passionate drive pushed him into many confrontations, both physical and political, as he sought a lasting legacy.



"Alexander Hamilton" by John Trumbull is in the public domain.

Journey to New York

Alexander Hamilton was born out of wedlock² to European parents on January 11, 1757. He grew up in the British West Indies, a group of small Caribbean islands off the coast of Florida. His childhood was marked with tragedy. First, his father abandoned him and his mother. Later, his mother died of a severe illness, and her estranged³ husband seized her estate from the orphaned Hamilton brothers. The boys lived briefly with a cousin, but they were separated when the cousin committed suicide.

This left 13-year-old Hamilton to fend for himself. He found a job at an import-export firm. Throughout his teenage years Hamilton was an avid⁴ reader, and he also developed an interest in writing.

In 1772 he wrote a vivid account of a recent hurricane that ended up in the local newspaper. Locals were astounded. This self-taught teenager had some serious talent! The town leaders raised enough money to send

1. the third Vice President of the United States, serving during President Thomas Jefferson's first term
2. The phrase "out of wedlock" means that a child is born when the mother and father are not married.
3. **Estranged (adjective)** no longer close, affectionate, or connected with someone
4. **Avid (adjective)** having or showing a great desire, interest, or enthusiasm for something

Hamilton on a ship to the mainland, where he could attend King's College in New York City. America was on the brink of the Revolutionary War.⁵

Military Success

- [5] King's College shut its doors in 1775, before Hamilton graduated, because British troops occupied New York City. Hamilton decided to enter the military. He saw the army as the best way to advance his political career. He moved through the ranks and soon became General George Washington's chief staff aide.

To Hamilton's disappointment, this position kept him out of direct combat. He persistently asked to be put in charge of troops on the battlefield. Washington finally relented⁶ and gave Hamilton a few battalions⁷ in the Battle of Yorktown, the battle that ultimately secured America's victory in the Revolutionary War.

The Lure of Politics

After the war, Hamilton briefly served on the Congress of the Confederation. Throughout his time there, he grew frustrated that Congress had so little power to solve problems or collect taxes. His irritation at government ineffectiveness foreshadowed a struggle he would fight for the rest of his career.

Even though he served as a private lawyer for several years, the temptation toward government service never left Hamilton. He despised the Articles of Confederation⁸ and wrote frequently about the many problems the document caused — and of course, he believed the government's lack of power formed the root of those problems. So in 1786 he spearheaded⁹ a campaign to create a new Congress and come up with a better governing document.

Crafting the Constitution

It is no surprise that Hamilton was chosen to serve on this new Constitutional Congress. However, he was well known as a headstrong debater who would argue tirelessly for his ideas no matter the consequences, winning him several enemies in the Confederation. He tirelessly lobbied¹⁰ for a powerful national government.

- [10] Even though he was ultimately dissatisfied with parts of the Constitution, he agreed to support it because he believed it was better than the Articles of Confederation. Hamilton, along with John Jay¹¹ and James Madison,¹²

5. the armed conflict between Great Britain and thirteen of its North American colonies that lasted from 1775-1783

6. **Relent (verb)** to agree to do or accept something after resisting or refusing

7. a large body of troops ready for battle

8. the original constitution of the U.S. that was eventually replaced by the U.S. Constitution in 1789

9. to lead a movement

10. to seek to influence a politician or public official on an issue

11. one of the Founding Fathers and the first Chief Justice of the United States

12. one of the Founding Fathers and the fourth President of the United States

anonymously published 85 essays defending the new Constitution to the general public. These are now known as *The Federalist Papers*.

Political Influence

After all the States agreed to live under the Constitution, General George Washington became President and appointed Hamilton to be Secretary of the Treasury Department. As the very first person in this role, Hamilton was able to design much of the structure and function of the Treasury. He redesigned large parts of the national financial system, established a Mint¹³ to make coins, and made regular financial reports to Congress.

Hamilton's tenure¹⁴ as Secretary of the Treasury led to the earliest U.S. political parties. Parts of his plans to overhaul¹⁵ the national financial system required Congressional approval, but some members of Congress disliked Hamilton and disagreed with his belief in strong government. James Madison and Thomas Jefferson started a Congressional faction¹⁶ against Hamilton's plans; they became known as the Democratic-Republicans, while Hamilton assembled the opposing Federalists.

Hamilton retired as Treasury Secretary in 1794 but remained an influential¹⁷ voice in politics. His headstrong personality came to a climax during the presidential election of 1800. His own party, the Federalists, supported John Adams to run for re-election. Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr both ran as Democratic-Republicans. Even though they shared a political party, Hamilton hated Adams and publicly ridiculed him. He also had a deep distrust of Aaron Burr. This left him supporting Thomas Jefferson, his career-long political enemy. When Jefferson and Burr tied, Hamilton was instrumental in breaking that tie and getting Jefferson elected President.

A Dramatic Death

Burr served as Vice President under Jefferson, but when it became clear that he would not be included on the ballot for re-election, Burr ran for Governor of New York in 1804. Once again, his opponent won with the aid of Alexander Hamilton. Soon after, a letter appeared in the *Albany Register*¹⁸ claiming Hamilton called Burr untrustworthy and a "dangerous man."

- [15] Because of this, and because of other unpleasant interactions with the very passionate Hamilton, Aaron Burr had fostered a deep dislike for him. Burr eventually challenged Hamilton to a gun duel. They faced each other on July 11, 1804. Hamilton aimed his gun at the sky at the last second, while Burr's bullet hit him in the ribs. The wound proved fatal, and Hamilton died the next day.

-
- 13. a place where money is made, especially under state authority
 - 14. the holding of an office
 - 15. to take something apart in order to examine it and repair it if necessary
 - 16. a group within a larger group that has different ideas and opinions than the rest of the group
 - 17. **Influential** (*adjective*) having influence or the power to cause change
 - 18. a newspaper

Hamilton Today

Alexander Hamilton is seen as one of the most influential founding fathers, particularly because of his contributions to the Federalist Papers and the Treasury Department. His portrait appears on the \$10 bill.

Hamilton became a recent cultural icon when, in 2015, the musical *Hamilton* premiered on Broadway in New York City. Writer and performer Lin-Manuel Miranda became interested in Hamilton's story when he read a biography of the famous founder, and decided to write a musical featuring him.

The play's success has brought Hamilton's story into the limelight,¹⁹ giving the Founding Father the lasting legacy he sought for much of his short but impactful life.

"Alexander Hamilton" by Jessica McBirney. Copyright © 2017 by CommonLit, Inc. This text is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

Unless otherwise noted, this content is licensed under the [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

19. the focus of public attention

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following identifies the central idea of the text?
 - A. Hamilton was responsible for shaping America's newly developing government, and supported the power remaining with the people rather than with the government.
 - B. Hamilton was too stubborn to admit when he was wrong or accept ideas other than his own, stunting America's progress.
 - C. Hamilton's strong opinions and tendency to fight relentlessly for his beliefs contributed to the large impact he had as a Founding Father, but also made him several enemies.
 - D. Hamilton's career began on the battlefield with General George Washington, but he preferred creating change out of harm's way.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "Nevertheless, Hamilton's passionate drive pushed him into many confrontations, both physical and political, as he sought a lasting legacy." (Paragraph 1)
 - B. "His irritation at government ineffectiveness foreshadowed a struggle he would fight for the rest of his career." (Paragraph 7)
 - C. "He despised the Articles of Confederation and wrote frequently about the many problems the document caused" (Paragraph 8)
 - D. "As the very first person in this role, Hamilton was able to design much of the structure and function of the Treasury." (Paragraph 11)

3. PART A: How do paragraphs 2-3 contribute to the development of ideas in the text?
 - A. They show that Hamilton had to overcome several obstacles early on in his life to succeed.
 - B. They show that Hamilton was intelligent from a young age and had a promising future ahead of him.
 - C. They show that Hamilton had the support of several family members to pursue his education.
 - D. They show how surprising Hamilton's later achievements were due to his difficult beginnings.

4. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "Alexander Hamilton was born out of wedlock to European parents on January 11, 1757." (Paragraph 2)
 - B. "He grew up in the British West Indies, a group of small Caribbean islands off the coast of Florida." (Paragraph 2)
 - C. "His childhood was marked with tragedy. First, his father abandoned him and his mother. Later, his mother died of a severe illness" (Paragraph 2)
 - D. "Throughout his teenage years Hamilton was an avid reader, and he also developed an interest in writing." (Paragraph 3)

5. How did Hamilton contribute to the changes made to the Articles of Confederation? How did his views on the Articles of Confederation compare to his views on the United States Constitution, which replaced the Articles?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Do you agree with Alexander Hamilton's argument for a strong government? Why or why not?

2. How does Alexander Hamilton's life in politics compare to the lives of political leaders today?

3. In the context of the text, how has America changed over time? How have America and its government changed following the Revolutionary War? How did Hamilton contribute to these changes? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

4. In the context of the text, how do people succeed? Which qualities contributed to Hamilton's success and influence? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

5. Hamilton went from being a orphaned immigrant to one of George Washington's closest allies and an influential Founding Father. In the context of this text, can you change your identity? What allowed Hamilton to change his?