



Hamilton, Alexander

As the principal author of the *Federalist Papers*, Alexander Hamilton (1755–1804), was the primary advocate among the Founding Fathers of strong national government. He died of injuries received in a duel with Aaron Burr.

Alexander Hamilton claimed to have been born on January 11, 1757, on the West Indian island of Nevis, though documentary evidence places his birth two years earlier. Details of his childhood are relatively scarce because Hamilton was sensitive about the circumstances of his birth. His mother, Rachael Faucett Lavien, was married to a man other than his father, James Hamilton. Rachael had left her husband for Hamilton, and Alexander was the second of their two illegitimate sons. James Hamilton abandoned Rachael and his sons in 1766 and returned to his native Scotland; Rachael died two years later.

Early Career and Education

After his mother's death Hamilton took a job in a countinghouse, a choice that ultimately culminated in his becoming the first U.S. secretary of the treasury, under President George Washington. At sixteen, Hamilton was left in charge of the business while the owner spent five months in New York; by all accounts Hamilton's tenure was a success.

That same year, 1772, Hamilton wrote a letter to his father about a hurricane that had hit Saint Croix. The letter, published in the *Royal Danish American Gazette*, convinced some of his fellow citizens that he had great potential, and they raised the funds to send him to America to further his education. Hamilton attended school in New Jersey in January 1773 and entered King's College (now Columbia University) in New York City in October 1774.

The Revolutionary War and Marriage

The ambitious young man began making a name for himself as tensions between Great Britain and its American colonies increased. In December 1774 he published a pamphlet, *A Full Vindication of the Measures of the Continental Congress*, and joined a company of militia. In March 1776 Hamilton, then twenty-one, accepted a commission as captain of a company of artillery, in command of sixty men. By year's end he had crossed the Delaware with General George Washington, and in March 1777 he was promoted to lieutenant colonel and aide-de-camp to Washington. Hamilton was present at a number of important Revolutionary War battles, including Brandywine, Germantown, and Yorktown, where he helped arrange the ceremony in which the British surrendered.

During the war, in December 1780, Hamilton married Elizabeth Schuyler, the daughter of General Philip Schuyler, one of New York's most prominent men. In the couple's twenty-five years of marriage, she would bear him six sons and two daughters. Their marriage would be marred by Hamilton's affair with Maria Reynolds. The affair also played a role in Hamilton's dispute with Aaron Burr, which ended in the duel that left Elizabeth a widow for the last fifty years of her life.

A New Nation

Hamilton served a brief term as a member of the Congress of the Confederation, but he left to pursue his interests in the law and banking. He was a delegate, however, to the Annapolis Convention, which called for a new constitutional convention and while serving in the New York legislature, he was chosen as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention of 1787.

An Advocate of a Strong Union

At the convention Hamilton was a consistent voice in favor of a strong central government, the powers of which would come at the expense of the states. He favored life terms for the president and senators, a plan that was adopted only for the judiciary. As a New York delegate, he sided with the big states in the divide between big and small states at the convention. His proposal that large states should have greater representation in the Senate was rejected.

Part of Hamilton's long-standing rivalry with Thomas Jefferson concerned their differing economic visions. Jefferson believed that agriculture was the basis of a commonwealth; Hamilton, while secretary of the treasury, argued before Congress that the federal government should encourage the manufacturing arising from the Industrial Revolution.

It ought readily to be conceded that the cultivation of the earth—as the primary and most certain source of national supply—as the immediate and chief source of subsistence to man—as the principal source of those materials which constitute the nutriment of other kinds of labor ... has intrinsically a strong claim to pre-eminence over every other kind of industry.

But, that it has a title to any thing like an exclusive predilection, in any country, ought to be admitted with great caution.... That its real interests, precious and important as without the help of exaggeration, they truly are, will be advanced, rather than injured by the due encouragement of manufactures, may, it is believed, be satisfactorily demonstrated. And it is also believed that the expediency of such encouragement in a general view may be shown to be recommended by the most cogent and persuasive motives of national policy.

ALEXANDER HAMILTON, "REPORT ON MANUFACTURES," DECEMBER 5, 1791

Despite coming out on the losing side of most of the significant debates, Hamilton became the chief advocate of the proposed Constitution when it went to the states for ratification. Along with John Jay and James Madison, he wrote the *Federalist Papers*, a series of eighty-five articles designed to win New York's ratification. Hamilton wrote fifty-one of the articles, including the famed number 84, which argues strenuously against the need for a Bill of Rights.

Rise and Fall

Under the new government created by the Constitution, Hamilton became President George Washington's secretary of the treasury, a post he held from 1789 to 1795. Hamilton proposed the establishment of the first Bank of the United States; argued for excise taxes on whiskey (which resulted in the Whiskey Rebellion), for tariffs, and for export duties; and (with Thomas Jefferson and James Madison) brokered the Compromise of 1790, which consolidated the debts of the states and the former government under the Articles of Confederation into a national debt assumed by the new federal government.

Hamilton resigned the treasury post under the cloud of his affair with Maria Reynolds, after her husband, who had been blackmailing Hamilton, was arrested for counterfeiting. He remained active, however, in the Federalist Party, which he had founded. His frequent quarrels with President John Adams, a fellow Federalist, may well have led to the victory in 1800 of the rival Democratic-Republican Party, whose ticket was headed by then Vice President Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr.

Duel to the Death

Even with the Republican victory, Hamilton still played a role in the election's outcome. Because Jefferson and Burr each received seventy-three electoral votes, the election was cast into the House of Representatives. Though Hamilton and Jefferson had very different visions of what the United States should become, Hamilton threw his support to Jefferson, most likely out of dislike for Burr. Jefferson became president; Burr, vice president.

Hamilton's animosity toward Burr did not end with his effort to deny him the presidency. He continued to attack Burr's integrity privately, and in April 1804 some of those attacks became public when a letter of Dr. Charles D. Cooper, in which he repeated what he had heard Hamilton say about Burr at a dinner party, was published in a number of newspapers.

Though duels were fought until the time of the Civil War, dueling was illegal in many states and frowned upon in most others. After Hamilton's death Burr was charged with murder in New York, where the challenge had been issued, and in New Jersey, where the duel took place. He fled to South Carolina to avoid prosecution. After the duel Hamilton's and Burr's seconds issued a joint statement.

The fire of Colonel Burr took effect, and General Hamilton almost instantly fell. Col. Burr then advanced toward General Hamilton, with a manner and gesture that appeared to General Hamilton's friend to be expressive of regret, but without speaking turned about and withdrew, being urged from the field by his

friend ... with a view to prevent his being recognized by the surgeon and bargemen, who were then approaching. No further communication took place between the principals, and the barge that carried Col. Burr immediately returned to the City.

NATHANIEL PENDLETON AND WILLIAM
VAN NESS, "REPORT OF THE SECONDS"

Burr demanded an apology from Hamilton; Hamilton refused to grant it or even to acknowledge that he had said anything for which it was necessary to apologize. On June 27, 1804, Burr formally challenged Hamilton to a duel, and Hamilton reluctantly agreed. The duel took place early on July 11 in Weehawken, New Jersey, at the spot where Hamilton's oldest son, Philip, had been killed in a duel three years earlier. Burr's pistol shot mortally wounded Hamilton, who succumbed the next day. He was buried on July 14 in New York City.

SCOTT P. RICHERT

See also: [ARTICLES OF CONFEDERATION](#); [BANK OF THE UNITED STATES](#); [BURR, AARON](#); [CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES](#); [FEDERALIST PAPERS](#); [JAY, JOHN](#); [JEFFERSON, THOMAS](#); [MADISON, JAMES](#); [WASHINGTON, GEORGE](#).

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