

Alexander Hamilton

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Alexander Hamilton was an American hero who was ashamed of his childhood. His mother had a bad reputation. She had been in prison and had abandoned her husband and child. She later lived with James Hamilton, but they were not married. People called Alexander and his brother names, even though none of this was their fault. The family lived on the island of Nevis in the Caribbean, because Alexander's father, like most of the British people in the Caribbean, was involved in the sugar trade. All around them, far outnumbering the white people on the islands, were African slaves who grew and harvested the sugar. Some people may have been able to overlook the nightmare of the slaves' lives, but Alexander was horrified by slavery and fought it all his life.

When Alexander was a boy, his father left the family for good. No one knows for sure how old he was at the time, because there are questions about his birth date.

Alexander believed he was born in 1757, but there is a legal record that gives the date as 1755. Some historians believe one date, and some trust the other. In the DiMenna Children's History Museum, 1757 is used with a question mark to show that it may not be right. If it is, Alexander was eight years old when his father left. His brother James was 12.

Needing to support her two sons, Alexander's mother moved the family to the nearby island of St. Croix, and opened a small shop. Alexander could not attend a Church of England school because his parents were not married. But there were books in his home. They weren't stories for children, but serious adult books: poetry, biography, religion. Alexander read and read, and used them to teach himself. (Imagine how hard that would be.)

When Alexander was 11, he and his mother both became ill with a fever that raged for days. He survived, but his mother did not. So Alexander Hamilton, the man whose face is now on the U.S. ten-dollar bill, was then a boy with no father, no mother, and no money. Relatives who might have taken care of him and his brother also died. There was no choice but to go to work. He was given a job in the local office of the New York trading firm, Cruger and Beekman. He was told to keep paperwork in order, make handwritten copies of documents, and do the bookkeeping. He was a smart, ambitious boy, and the clerk's job embarrassed him, but he later said it was the most useful part of his education, because he learned about trade. He learned how materials were grown and processed and shipped, how money was made and spent, and how good business decisions were made, and he later put these lessons to important work.

When he was 15, Hamilton wrote a letter to his father that aimed his life in a new direction. He described a hurricane that had hit the island. He showed it to an editor who published it in the local newspaper. Some local businessmen were so impressed by this young writer that they donated



National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; Gift of Henry Cabot Lodge

portrait of Alexander Hamilton

money to help him go to New York City and enroll in King's College (now Columbia University). Hamilton packed his bags and never looked back.

But he did not finish college. He had arrived in New York just as the colonists were moving toward revolution, and he was swept up in the fiery political atmosphere. He left school and joined the continental army. This time, Hamilton impressed General George Washington, and he spent most of the war as Washington's aide-de-camp, his right-hand man. He was 26 when the American Revolution ended. He had already lived a dramatic life, but he had not yet begun the work that would make him famous—helping to design the government of a new nation, the United States.

How do you do that? How do you go from fighting a war to making a country unlike any that has existed before? Hamilton, Washington, and other leaders knew that the constitution written during the war—called the Articles of Confederation—needed to be changed. It gave the states most of the power, and made the central government so weak it could not function. Hamilton took part in the convention that drafted a new constitution, and later he wrote most of the Federalist Papers to persuade the states to ratify it. When they did, George Washington became the nation's first president, and he named Hamilton the first secretary of the treasury. He was now the second most powerful man in America.

It was not hard to see what the country's financial problems were. Americans had debts they had to repay, especially to France and Spain, which had lent [them] money during the Revolution. Other countries would not trust the United States if the country did not repay loans. The currency was a confused mess before the Revolution, and war made it worse. All sorts of money was in circulation, produced by foreign countries, states, and even private companies. Much of it was worthless or fake. If you needed to buy fabric for a new coat, paying a fair price was not easy. Trade was suffering, and as Hamilton had learned as a boy, trade was the key to a healthy economy.

Hamilton recognized that these financial problems were more than annoying; they threatened to bring the United States to its knees. His genius was in seeing how to fix them, and persuading others to follow his suggestions. During his time as treasury secretary, he created a national bank so the country would have a place to keep its money, and a way to make loans and pay debts. He created a national currency, the same system used today, and he established the U. S. Mint to manufacture the country's coins. He raised money by charging tariffs on imported goods, and taxing products made in the U.S. (Taxes are never popular. When Hamilton decided to tax whiskey, farmers rebelled, and soldiers were sent to restore order.)

Alexander Hamilton was secretary of the treasury from 1790 to 1795. When he resigned and left the capital, which was then Philadelphia, he returned to New York City and built a house where he lived with his wife and children. In 1804, Vice President Aaron Burr, a long-time political enemy, was enraged by a comment Hamilton made and challenged him to a duel. Hamilton was opposed to duels in principle, and his oldest son had died in one just three years earlier. But he felt honor-bound to meet Burr at the appointed place and time. Hamilton was shot and mortally wounded, and he died the next day. But the boy who had had such a rocky start in the Caribbean left a permanent legacy: the United States financial system, which is still in use today.