Alexander Hamilton
By: N. Brunette

Alexander Hamilton is quite possibly the least known founding father. Even though he created the American Coast Guard and died in a duel, he is best remembered for being the very first secretary of the treasury. Despite his very troublesome past Alex grew up to be a very interesting man, having an affair, becoming George Washington's right-hand man, ruining his reputation, and becoming a lawyer in about six months.

Alexander Hamilton was born on the West Indian island of Nevis on January 11, 1755 (or 1757, the actual year of his birth is unknown). Hamilton is the illegitimate son, meaning “a child who is born to parents who are not married”, of James Hamilton, a Scottish trader, and Rachel Faucette Lavien. While many other founding fathers grew up in clean New England towns or were pampered in fancy Virginia homes, Hamilton grew up in a tropical disaster full of wild whites and very hard to control slaves. When Hamilton was younger his mother may have taught him to speak French. When he was older he was comfortably bilingual and later in his life was better at speaking French than Franklin, Adams, Jefferson and many other Americans who had spent years in Paris trying to learn the language. Now for a second let’s pause and count the disasters that happened to Alexander Hamilton and his older brother, James Hamilton Jr., between 1765 and 1769: their father left them, their mother died, their cousin, who they went to live with for a while, committed a very gruesome suicide, and their aunt, uncle, and grandmother all passed away. James, sixteen, and Alexander, fourteen, were now alone and penniless.

On August 31, 1772, a hurricane swept through St. Croix. On September 6, Hugh Knox delivered a speech in his church, that was later published as a pamphlet. Hamilton must have gone to Knox’s speech and been inspired. He went home and wrote a long letter to his father, about the horrors of the hurricane. Hamilton must have shown the letter to Knox, who was able to persuade him
to publish it in the Royal Danish American Gazette, where it appeared on October 3rd. A note to the piece, probably written by Knox, explained: "The following letter was written the week after the late hurricane, by a youth of this island, to his father; the copy of it fell by accident into the hands of a gentleman, who, being pleased with it himself, showed it to others to whom it gave equal satisfaction, and who all agreed that it might not prove unentertaining to the public." Knox also noted that the author, who was anonymous at the time, had at first declined to publish it. Little did Hamilton know that he had just written his way out of poverty.

Once it was revealed that Hamilton was the author of the letter, his town took up a collection to send him to America thinking that Hamilton should have a proper education. Hamilton was first enrolled in Elizabethtown Academy in Elizabethtown New Jersey, where he had to take Latin, Greek, and advanced math just to qualify for college. Hamilton soon made his first friend: a tailor by the name of Hercules Mulligan who was born in Ireland in 1740. John Witherspoon, the president of Princeton College, was a very intimidating figure. Hamilton with his rock-hard ego made a bizarre proposition. According to Hercules Mulligan, Hamilton told Witherspoon that he wanted to start college and excel "with as much rapidity as his exertions would enable him to do. Dr. Witherspoon listened with great attention to so unusual a proposition from so young a person and replied that he had not the sole power to determine that but that he would submit the request to the trustees who would decide.". A few years earlier when Witherspoon took over at Princeton, he had tried to reinforce the admissions. Mulligan blamed administrators for refusing the proposal, explaining that about two weeks later Hamilton received a letter from Witherspoon "stating that the request could not be complied with because it was contrary to the usage of the college and expressing his regret because he was convinced that the young gentleman would do honor to any seminary at which he should be educated."

Sadly there are no drawings or paintings of Hamilton at this point in his life. From later drawings, paintings, and descriptions, we can conclude that he was about five foot seven, had a fair
complexion, auburn hair, rosy cheeks, and a wide mouth. Right before the Revolutionary War, Hamilton became one of the captains of the artillery, or of the weapons. Hamilton helped in the battles of Long Island, White Plains, Trenton, and Princeton. Nathanael Greene noticed Hamilton's extreme courage and introduced him to George Washington, with a recommendation for advancement. In March 1777, Washington made Hamilton his aide-de-camp, or "a military officer acting as a confidential assistant to a senior officer", and also his personal secretary. On December 14, 1780, Hamilton married Elizabeth Schuyler, the daughter of General Philip John Schuyler. In 1781, Hamilton resigned from Washington's staff after a dispute with the general. Fortunately, Hamilton remained in the army and was able to lead a small group of New York soldiers during the battle of Yorktown. Near the end of the Revolution, Hamilton went to Albany, New York to study law. On January 22, 1782, Philip Hamilton, Hamilton's first child out of 8, was born. From 1782-83 Hamilton served in the Continental Congress and then went back to practicing law, later becoming one of the big-name lawyers in New York City.

In 1788, Hamilton, with help from James Madison and John Jay, wrote The Federalist Papers (originally called The Federalist). Hamilton wrote about 51 of the 85 essays, Jay stopped after he wrote 5 because he got sick, and Madison wrote about 29. Soon after the founding of the new American government in 1789, President George Washington named Hamilton as the first secretary of the treasury. In the summer of 1791, 23-year-old Maria Reynolds approached Alexander Hamilton, who was 34 at the time and also married, in Philadelphia. Mrs. Reynolds requested Hamilton's help and financial aid claiming her husband, James, had abandoned her. At the time Hamilton did not have any money on him, so he got her address so that he could deliver the money in person. When Hamilton showed up at the house that Maria was staying in she brought him upstairs and led him to the bedroom; later he narrated that "Some conversation ensued from which it was quickly apparent that other than pecuniary consolation would be acceptable.". The two of them began an illegal affair that would last, with differing regularity, until June 1792.
In 1795, Hamilton returned to New York City to practice law once again. Washington stayed in touch with Hamilton, who helped write Washington’s farewell letter to the public that was released in September 1796. In 1797, John Adams was elected president, and in 1798, after a request from Washington, Adams unwillingly named Hamilton inspector general of the army when a war with France had seemed possible. Afterward, Hamilton and Adams argued both privately and publicly.

During the presidential election of 1800, Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr were the two main candidates. After Burr and Jefferson got the same amount of votes from the public, the election went to the House of Representatives. The president was only decided because Hamilton voted for Jefferson thinking that he was the better of the two. Sadly on November 24, 1801, Philip Hamilton, Alexander Hamilton’s eldest son who was 19 at the time, died in a duel with George Eacker in Weehawken, New Jersey. In 1804 Burr was a candidate for governor of New York State, Hamilton, once again, voted against him hoping to keep Burr out of office. Burr, antagonized, started writing letters to Hamilton, one of which Burr challenged Hamilton to a duel, which Hamilton accepted. On the morning of the duel, Hamilton finished writing his farewell letter to Eliza, by the time he finished, however, Nathaniel Pendleton [Hamilton’s second] and Dr. David Hosak [the surgeon] had arrived ready to accompany him to Weehawken. To avoid detection, Pendleton and William Peter Van Ness [Burr’s second] had worked out a timetable with both groups to leave different Manhattan docks at around 5:00 A.M.

According to Ron Chernow “Each boat was to be rowed by four weaponless oarsmen whose identities would remain secret, sparing them any liability. The pistols were secreted in a leather case so that the boatmen could later swear under oath that they had never set eyes on any guns. Aside from the oarsmen, only the duelist, his second, and the surgeon were allowed on each boat.” (700).

At 7:00 A.M on July 11, 1804, Aaron Burr and Alexander stood in front of each other, ready to finish their argument once and for all. As Hamilton and his party were challenged, Hamilton had to pick the weapons and chose flintlock pistols. Pendleton and Van Ness specified a few things about the requirements of the guns: the barrels could be no larger than eleven inches and had to be
smoothbore, “Smoothbore pistols were unreliable; by contrast, if the pistol barrels were rifled, the inner grooves made possible greater accuracy”. Pendleton asked the two of them if they were ready, to which they both replied yes, then he uttered the word Present. Burr and Hamilton both lifted their pistols. Both guns shot, separated by a second or two. No one knows for sure who shot first, but either way, Hamilton was shot a bit above his right hip. According to Pendleton, "Hamilton rose up on his toes, writhing violently and twisting slightly to the left before toppling headlong to the ground". Right before Burr and Van Ness stepped onto their boat, Burr said to Van Ness, thinking of Hamilton, "I must go and speak to him!" Van Ness advised that this was an awful idea. To satisfy Burr, Van Ness ran up the hill to check Hamilton’s state before they left.

Despite the pain, Hamilton worried constantly about Eliza and his children. When Eliza showed up at the hospital, she was told that her husband was suffering from "spasms". When Eliza discovered the horrid truth, she grew "half-distracted". To comfort her, Hamilton kept repeating the same sentence, that he knew would soothe her: "Remember, my Eliza, you are a Christian." In Hamilton’s last hours, over twenty friends and family members came to see him, most of them prayed on their knees. Hamilton said to Bishop Moore “that he bore no malice toward Burr, that he was dying in a peaceful state, and that he was reconciled to his God and his fate.” At 2:00 P.M. on Thursday, July 12, 1804, thirty-one hours after the duel, forty-nine-year-old Alexander Hamilton died. No one knows for sure when Eliza first saw Hamilton’s last letter, that read:

This letter, my very dear Eliza, will not be delivered to you unless I shall first have terminated my earthly career to begin, as I humbly hope from redeeming grace and divine mercy, happy immortality. If it had been possible for me to have avoided the interview, my love for you and my precious children would have been alone a decisive motive. But it was not possible without sacrifices which would have rendered me unworthy of your esteem. I need not tell you of the pangs I feel from the idea of quitting you and exposing you to the anguish which I know you would feel. Nor could I dwell on the topic lest it should unman me. The consolations of religion,
my beloved, can alone support you and these you have a right to enjoy. Fly to the bosom of your God and be comforted. With my last idea, I shall cherish the sweet hope of meeting you in a better world. Adieu best of wives and best of women. Embrace all my darling children for me.

Ever yours

A H

On November 9, 1854-fifty years after her husband died-Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton died at age ninety-seven. She was buried right beside Hamilton in the Trinity Churchyard.

Alexander Hamilton was a very interesting man. Despite the tragedies in his life, he always overcame them. The tragedies in his life just made him stronger, and the people around him helped him grow as a person. Even though many people in history dislike him, because of his faults, America wouldn't have many things that we have today such as a good government system and a Coast Guard without him.
Works Cited


"Hamilton, Alexander." *Funk & Wagnalls New World Encyclopedia*, Jan. 2018, p. 1; EBSCOhost,


