The Little Lion:
How a man who started with nothing changed a nation’s economy

Kiley Williams-Chvosta

Historical Paper

Junior Division

Paper Length: 2500
Introduction

On June 17, 2015, 76th Secretary of the Treasury, Jack Lew, announced the removal of the face on the US’s ten dollar bill, Alexander Hamilton. Commonly mistaken as a president for his portrait on the USA’s currency, Hamilton’s role in history was often disregarded, but the forgotten founding father’s empowering story shows us why we still see his face today. Alexander Hamilton’s influential contributions to the United States as Secretary of the Treasury from September 11th, 1789, to January 31st, 1795, set precedents for the future of the US’s economy. Without him, our economy would not be as successful as it is today.

Rising Up

A decade before Hamilton’s appointment to Secretary of the Treasury, the Revolutionary War was ablaze, and 24 year-old Alexander Hamilton was an aide-de-camp for General George Washington. Being led into the cause of the war after the Royal Danish American Gazette sent him to America on account of his letter to his father, James Hamilton, on the hurricane he experienced in 1772. After arriving in America, he entered King’s college (now Columbia University), and soon was inspired by the rebel cause to fight for independence. After raising the New York Provincial Company of Artillery and becoming its captain, Hamilton was beginning

to be recognized by army commanders. Being offered positions on their staff, he refused them all, until General George Washington offered him a position.⁴

During this time, the only established government in effect was the Articles of Confederation. Being considered a weak form of government, they were replaced with the Constitution. As author of fifty-one of the eighty-five federalist papers, Hamilton fervently defended the document, as he believed in a strong federal government and that this was what the Constitution outlined. In the years to come, he uses this belief to support his bank.

When elected president in 1789, one of Washington’s first duties was to select his cabinet. First selecting Robert Morris, also known as “financier of the revolution” for Treasury Secretary, but he refused the seat. Recommending Hamilton instead, Washington sent his first nomination to the senate on September 11th, 1789. Within mere minutes of the proposal, the senate approved the appointment of 34-year-old lawyer Hamilton.⁵

**Serving As Secretary**

Hamilton’s appointment to Treasury Secretary had multiple distinguished viewpoints to which people felt strong about. For example, for Alexander Hamilton, an illegitimate immigrant from the small island of Nevis in the British West Indies, who was on his own from an early age, this was an accomplishment beyond society’s limits.

However, former ambassador of France, Thomas Jefferson, would learn that Hamilton’s ambition would become his worst enemy. While only being back from France for a couple

---


months, Jefferson was added to Washington’s cabinet as the first Secretary of State. Over the next few years, the two who barely knew each other, became one of the U.S.’s most iconic rivals in political disputes. They would later learn to give up some of their battles to get the balanced nation that they needed.

After his appointment, people were most concerned how Hamilton planned to pay off the war debt. With that concern in mind, Hamilton was given the task of preparing a report within 110 days, which he would later present to Congress in January of 1790. Hamilton’s plan, to assume state debts, meant the federal government would use taxes from states that had already paid for their debt to pay off other states that hadn’t, costing states like Jefferson’s home state, Virginia, more money. After the war, most states couldn’t pay off their debt, and for states who had, raising taxes angered their citizens. Also in Hamilton’s report was how he planned to pay off taxes, by taxing what he proposed luxuries, including coffee, tea, wine, postal revenues, and whiskey.

Being accused of favoring higher power, rather than farmers and workers, Hamilton’s ideas were critically viewed not only society, but by politicians such as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Neither of the two Virginians wished Hamilton to assume state debts, but seeing compromise as their only option, the three met to compromise on June 20th, 1790. This agreement stated that Jefferson and Madison would gather support for Hamilton’s plan to assume

---
state debts in the south, and in return they agreed on the location of the nation’s capital, in Virginia, on the Potomac river.\(^9\) Later that year, on December 13th, 1790, Hamilton wrote a letter to George Washington and sent his proposal for a national bank. Even though people like Thomas Jefferson thought a bank unconstitutional, as it was not included in the Constitution, others like Hamilton argued that the Constitution was only a general guideline for a strong federal government and not loose enough to mention a national bank. Making an influential decision, Washington signed the document, officializing Hamilton’s Bank.\(^10\)

Almost 15 months later on April 2, 1792, the first national mint was created by Congress under the Coinage Act of 1792.\(^11\) Having passed a debt plan, his bank plan officialized, and the US’s first national mint, the now 37-year-old Hamilton had risen to one of the highest and most respected positions in the nation. Unfortunately, his triumph wouldn’t last long.

The Beginning of the End

All seemed at ease until 1791, when Hamilton’s father-in-law, Philip Schuyler, re-ran for his New York senate seat. He was beat by Aaron Burr, who up until then, seemed only a mere friendly acquaintance of Hamilton’s. To run for the senate seat, Aaron Burr changed political parties, which Hamilton saw as a heinous crime, while Burr saw nothing wrong with trying to


seize the opportunity. Taking Burr’s point-of-view into account, it makes it easy to see that he didn’t have a robust opinion on any political standpoints. This correlates with a quote that Hamilton had said, “Those who stand for nothing, fall for anything.” Which if compared to disputes between Hamilton and Burr, seems like an example of consistency. When Burr changed parties, or ran for offices, he didn’t take a stand for his beliefs, and fell into the spot of second best every time.

Years later, in 1800, a new problem arose. Democratic Republican running mates Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr were running for the U.S. presidency against Federalists John Adams and Charles Cotesworth Pinckney. When votes from the state’s electors came in, all was in favor for Jefferson and Burr, but no clear indication was made for which man was to be president, so the election was considered a tie. In the election between Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr, they tied, and the decision was up to Alexander Hamilton to support one of the candidates. The clear choice would have been Aaron Burr, who was gaining support from most Federalists, against Thomas Jefferson, the enemy and polar opposite of Hamilton. Shockingly, Hamilton decided to support Jefferson, and he became the third president of the United States. This action seemed almost unpredictable, and its said that Hamilton did it because he believed Jefferson was the lesser of the two evils and that Burr, who was younger and less experienced than Jefferson, did anything he could to move up quickly through society. Whereas Burr believed that Hamilton took every opportunity to better himself, and never learned to wait. Being someone who came from poverty, and when given the chance to show his potential, he took it. His rise in society made some believe that he was selfish and naive. Compared to what happened
between the two men four years later, the election was only the gruesome uprising in the downfall of their dispute.

In 1804, Aaron Burr changed parties again to run for governor of New York, Hamilton, being the natural opposition, questioned his morality in public, and by doing so, began to destroy his campaign. Later, after Hamilton criticized Burr at a dinner party, they began to battle through a series of letters. In a letter Burr writes to Hamilton accuses him of dishonoring him when he said,

“The Common sense of Mankind affixes to the epithet adopted by Dr Cooper the idea of dishonor: it has been publicly applied to me under the Sanction of your name. The question is not whether he has understood the meaning of the word or has used it according to Syntax and with grammatical accuracy, but whether you have authorised this application either directly or by uttering expressions or opinions derogatory to my honor.”

Instead of these letters solving their differences, the two men’s argument escalated so much that they had crossed the Rubicon. After writing a few letters back and forth, Burr had decided he had had enough, and challenged Hamilton to a duel.

**The Dueling Day of Demise**

On July 11, 1804, after Burr awoke and had put on a coat said to be “impenetrable to ball,” (bulletproof) he and his second William P. Van Ness were rowed across the Hudson by

---


14 ----. "10 Things You Need to Know About the Hamilton-Burr Duel, According to Hamilton's Burr." ENCYCLOPÆDIA BRITANNICA, www.britannica.com/list/
four men, and arrived at the dueling grounds first at 6:30, at what is now Hamilton park in New Jersey. The two men cleared what would be the dueling ground, as Hamilton with his second, Nathaniel Pendleton, and his physician, Dr. David Hosack, rowed across the Hudson from a separate dock, as to not arouse suspicion. Duels were illegal in both New York and New Jersey, but were not dealt as severely as they would be in New York. When Hamilton arrived, he took the northern position. Holding the pistols that were used in the duel that killed his 19-year-old son Philip in 1801, Hamilton decided not to set the handspring trigger, and after aiming his pistol, asked to put on his glasses. They prepared to shoot, then fired. It’s unknown who fired first, or if Hamilton had fired at the sky as result of being hit, or if he had simply shot at the sky first. According to his intentions, Hamilton was never going to shoot Burr. But as shots fired, and Hamilton’s ricocheted into the endless sky, Burr’s bullet had hit it’s target.

Hamilton was hit in the abdominal region above his right hip. The bullet fractured a rib, went through his diaphragm and liver, and then lodged in his spine. Burr attempted to approach his wounded enemy, perhaps to see if he was alright, but was ushered away by his second. As Hamilton was rowed to the house of his friend William Bayard, Burr went to eat breakfast.


Hamilton stayed in the same bed as he saw his children, his wife Eliza, her sister, Angelica Schuyler Church, Reverend Benjamin Moore, and his best friend, Gouverneur Morris, for the last time, before passing away on July 12th, 1804, in the afternoon. It is said that his last words were, “Remember, my Eliza, you are a Christian.”

The Fallen Father’s Funeral

The news shocked the entire nation, to say the least. From common people to political rivals such as Thomas Jefferson, it was alarming news. Hamilton’s funeral was held at Trinity Church on July 14th. His friend Gouverneur Morris gave his eulogy, and in a paragraph he spoke of the genius that Washington had seen in him when looking for a Treasury Secretary,

“At the time when our government was organised, we were without funds, though not without resources. To call them into action, and establish order in the finances, Washington sought for splendid talents, for extensive information, and, above all, he sought for sterling, incorruptible integrity—All these he found in Hamilton. The system then adopted has been the subject of much animadversion. If it be not without a fault, let it be remembered that nothing human is perfect. Recollect the circumstances of the moment—recollect the conflict of opinion—and above all, remember that the minister of a republic must bend to the will of the people. The administration which Washington formed, was one of the most efficient, one of the best that any country was ever blest with. And the result was a rapid advance in power and prosperity, of which there is no example in any other age or nation. The part which Hamilton bore is universally known.”

He was then buried in Trinity Churchyard, and his gravestone still reads:

---


TO THE MEMORY OF
ALEXANDER HAMILTON
THE CORPORATION OF TRINITY CHURCH HAS ERECTED THIS
MONUMENT
IN TESTIMONY OF THEIR RESPECT
FOR
THE PATRIOT OF INCORRUPTIBLE INTEGRITY.
THE SOLDIER OF APPROVED VALOUR.
THE STATESMAN OF CONSUMMATE WISDOM;
WHOSE TALENTS AND VIRTUES WILL BE ADMIREDBY
GRATEFUL POSTERITY
LONG AFTER THIS MARBLE SHALL HAVE MOULDERED INTO DUST.
HE DIED JULY 12TH 1804. AGED 47.  

Long Lasting Legacy

On August 2nd, the vice president Aaron Burr was charged on 2 counts: the misdemeanor of dueling, and the felony of murder by New York coroner’s jury. He later fled to Georgia to stay with Senator Pierce Butler who offered him sanctuary. 

Looking back on his affair with Hamilton years later, he says, “Had I read Sterne more and Voltaire less, I should have known the world was wide enough for Hamilton and me.” Aaron Burr may have lived, but he never rose to any sort of office again. He had left Hamilton’s seven children fatherless, and sisters Elizabeth Hamilton and Angelica Schuyler Church to suffer the consequences. Luckily, Gouverneur Morris offered to help the Hamilton family with their debt, and they were forever grateful.

---

20 Find A Grave, database and images (https://www.findagrave.com : accessed 03 January 2019), memorial page for Alexander Hamilton (11 Jan 1757–12 Jul 1804), Find A Grave Memorial no. 437, citing Trinity Churchyard, Manhattan, New York County (Manhattan), New York, USA ; Maintained by Find A Grave.

Alexander Hamilton’s influence on American society and our economy is not only an enormous accomplishment, but it’s an accomplishment that changed the past ideals for our nation, and replaced them with the flourishing economy we see today. Without him, our nation’s government would be different, and possibly not as successful. When he entered the position of Treasury Secretary in 1789, the country was in millions of dollars of debt, and when he left almost five and a half years later, the country’s debt was paid off, we had a national currency, and our first national bank. Without the charismatic qualities that he displayed fervently, both when he wrote and when he publicly spoke, it makes you wonder what the world would be without Alexander Hamilton. Journalist and columnist for The Washington Post, George F. Will sheds light on how Hamilton affected our nation when he says,

“There is an elegant memorial in Washington to Jefferson, but none to Hamilton. However, if you seek Hamilton's monument, look around. You are living in it. We honor Jefferson, but live in Hamilton's country, a mighty industrial nation with a strong central government.”

Dedicating his introduction to Hamilton’s wife, Elizabeth, Ron Chernow mentions something she had said, “Justice shall be done in the memory of my Hamilton.” It makes you wonder, has justice been done? A man downcast by most modern and historical society, our forgotten founding father, who was willing to risk everything in order to achieve his goals. Do we give him enough recognition for all he gave to our nation? Whether justice has been done or not, looking into the past, and even now in the present, we can see what Alexander Hamilton has done for our nation’s future.

Works Cited

Primary Sources


memorial page for Alexander Hamilton (11 Jan 1757–12 Jul 1804), Find A Grave
Memorial no. 437, citing Trinity Churchyard, Manhattan, New York County
(Manhattan), New York, USA ; Maintained by Find A Grave . The Find A Grave website
has photos of Alexander Hamilton's grave and shows the inscription that is still on
Hamilton's grave today.

---. "From Alexander Hamilton to George Washington, 13 December 1790."

*founders.archives.gov*, 13 Dec. 1790,

founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-07-02-0228#ARHN-01-07-02-0228-fn-00
01. Accessed 8 Dec. 2018. This is the letter from Alexander Hamilton to George
Washington on December 13, 1790

● ---. "1790: Hamilton, First Report on Public Credit." *oll.libertyfund.org*, 13 Apr. 2016,
2018. Primary source, Hamilton's report to congress that was first read on January 14,
1790 about the national debt, taxes, etc.


**Secondary Sources**


2018. Includes chronological order of the early struggles of creating the U.S. and the
government we have today.

Editors, History.com. "Washington unanimously elected by Electoral College to first and second
terms." History.com, A&E Television Networks, 13 Nov. 2009,
www.history.com/this-day-in-history/washington-unanimously-elected-by-electoral-colle-
ge-to-first-and-second-terms. This website describes political disputes in the early U.S.

Federer, Bill. "Why did Aaron Burr hate Alexander Hamilton?" wnd.com, 10 July 2016,
2018. This website explains some arguments between Alexander Hamilton and Aaron
Burr.

Nov. 2004,
www.smithsonianmag.com/history/thomas-jefferson-aaron-burr-and-the-election-of-1800-
-131082359/. Accessed 9 Dec. 2018. This website explains what happened during the
election of 1800, as well as the results.

From the Archives. "The Last Hours of Alexander Hamilton." trinitywallstreet.org, 9 July 2014,
Accessed 9 Dec. 2018. Explains what happened in the last hours of Hamilton's Life, and
about Governor Morris giving Hamilton's eulogy at his funeral.

thoughtco.com/duel-between-alexander-hamilton-aaron-burr-104604. puzzle piece 5,
causes of rivalry between Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton


Smith, Russell P. Alexander Hamilton. Fort Washington, Eastern National, 2017. This short work gives a lot of the basic information on the life of Hamilton including dates.


Sutter, Erin. "The Compromise that Created Our Capital." TeachingAmericanHistory.org, unknown, teachingamericanhistory.org/past-programs/hfotw/07152012-2/. This website
talks about the compromise between Hamilton, Jefferson, and Madison. Also known as the Compromise of 1790.


222204. Accessed 2 Jan. 2019. This website tells the story of the replacement on the face of $20 and why Hamilton was spared.