

# Alexander Hamilton

Well, how *did* a “bastard, orphan, son of a whore and a Scotsman, dropped in the middle of a forgotten spot In the Caribbean by providence, impoverished, in squalor, Grow up to be a hero and a scholar?”

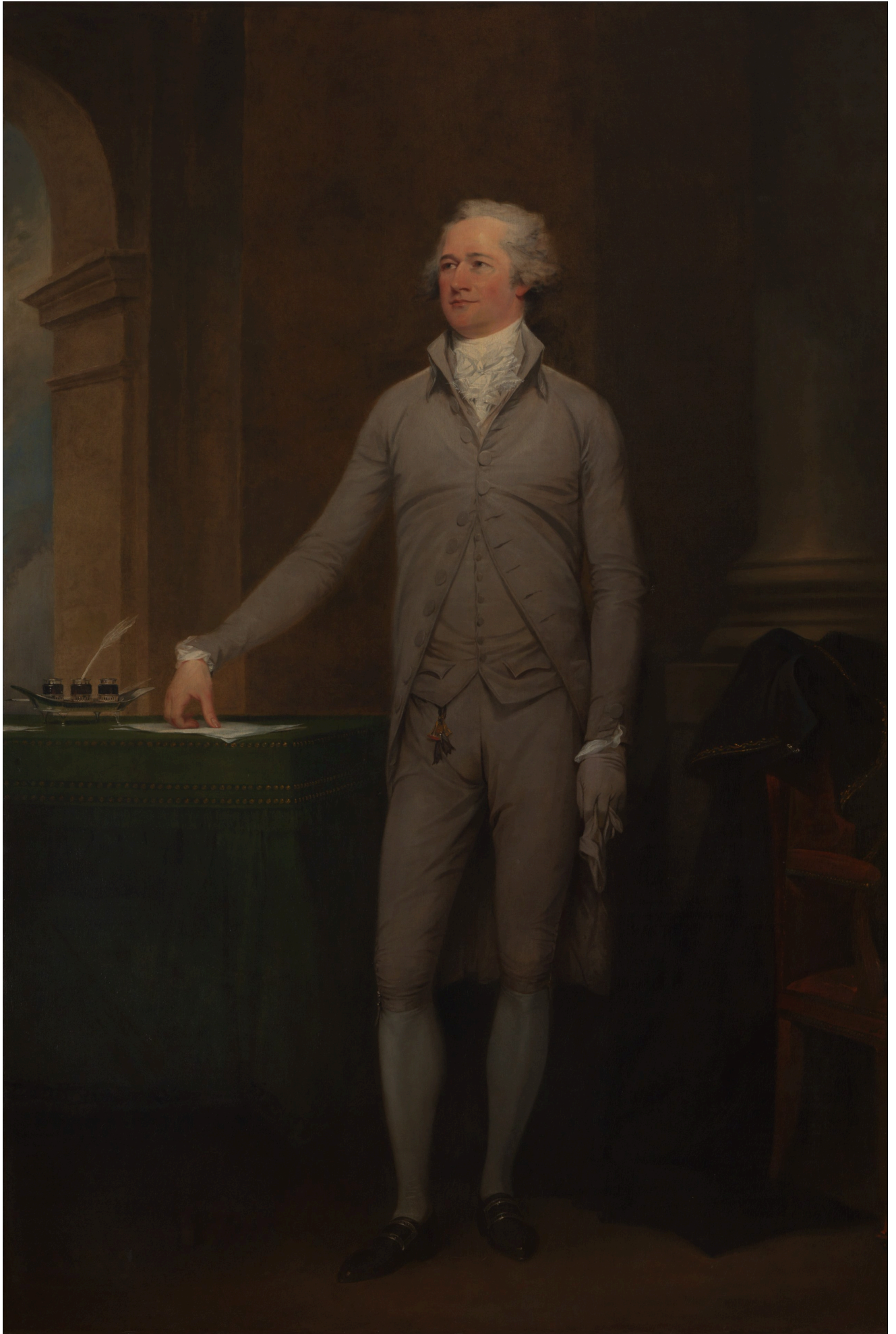
The best answer that we have to this question, posed at the opening of Lin-Manuel Miranda’s Broadway hit *Hamilton*, is that Alexander Hamilton was a man of rare intellectual gifts, determination, and, in particular, extraordinary rhetorical abilities. Hamilton first came to public notice at the age of seventeen when a letter to his father describing a hurricane on St. Croix was published in a local newspaper. The account was so vivid and remarkable that businessmen on the island raised money to send Hamilton to the mainland to get the kind of formal education that was impossible in the Caribbean. Hamilton went first to a boarding school in Elizabeth, New Jersey, and then to King’s College in New York City (the ancestor of Columbia University).

Hamilton rose quickly, seizing his opportunity with the start of the American Revolutionary War to join the militia in New York, and to write on behalf of the colonists. He became George Washington’s private secretary, drafting Washington’s correspondence during the war, writing his speeches and orders. After the war, he became a lawyer in New York City, and founded the Bank of New York. Hamilton was drawn back into public life when a meeting was called at Annapolis to try to improve trade between the states, which were functioning much as independent countries, setting up tariffs and trade barriers. It was Hamilton who proposed and drafted the resolution that called for a full Constitutional convention to replace the Articles of Confederation, which many realized at this point were clearly not working. Although he did not participate much in the Constitutional Convention in the summer of 1787, he was a supporter of a strong, centralized

Federal government that would have the ultimate authority over the laws and economic policies of the still-young United States.

Hamilton's most famous public writings are in the essay series called the *Federalist*. Modeled, as so many eighteenth-century periodicals were, on Addison and Steele's *The Spectator*, the *Federalist* was, like its predecessor, written by a small group of writers: Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison, all of whom would publish under an *eidolon*, the common name "Publius." The essays, published originally in New York city newspapers from October 27, 1787 to August 16, 1788 and immediately issued in a separate printed volume, joined in a vigorous debate about whether New York should ratify the recently-passed U. S. Constitution. Many elite New Yorkers were openly skeptical, and the *Federalist* was designed to sway opinion in the direction of ratification. The essays were published anonymously, and it was only in recent decades that the authorship of individual issues has been determined. Of the eighty-five issues, Hamilton was responsible for fifty one; Madison for twenty six, and the rest were written by Jay (who had fallen ill and was unable to participate after the first few issues). The *Federalist* lays out the theory behind the Constitution, and remains one of the most rigorous works of political theory written in English.





John Trumbull (American, Lebanon, Connecticut 1756–1843 New York)

Alexander Hamilton, 1792

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Hamilton became the first Treasury Secretary, serving under George Washington, a position that entailed an enormous amount of responsibility, given that the Federal government's first order of business was to figure out how to retire the enormous debts accrued by the states during the Revolutionary War. Hamilton had the U. S. Government accept responsibility for those debts, a controversial move that proved to be the correct one, freeing individual states up from servicing the debts on their own, and establishing the nation's credit in international markets. Hamilton died in a famous duel with Aaron Burr, a one-time friend and long-time rival. There was a lot of bad blood between the two by this time, but in the moment Burr was angry that Hamilton had written against him when Burr was running for governor of New York. The duel took place on July 11, 1804 in Weehawken, New Jersey, across the Hudson from New York City. Because he died relatively young—decades before his contemporaries Thomas Jefferson or John Adams (he had complicated relationships with both of them as well), and because he never served as President himself, Hamilton was for a long time a somewhat neglected member of the founding generation of the U. S. governing class. In recent years, scholars have given new attention to Hamilton's skills in setting up so many of the institutions of the Federal government and his rhetorical gifts. The 2005 publication of Ronald Chernow's biography *Alexander Hamilton* and the subsequent musical based on it by Lin-Manuel Miranda have brought Hamilton to a new kind of popular attention and prominence.