

THE MIRACLE OF HAMILTON, THE PERSON AND THE PLAY

My thanks to Ron Chernow who wrote the definitive biography of Alexander Hamilton.

Three miracles are associated with Alexander Hamilton – He was an illegitimate child born on a remote Caribbean island who escaped from poverty, he is remembered as an American hero and founding father, and lastly the play Hamilton which celebrates his life.

Hamilton lived an amazing life; a miraculous life. If there was a Horatio Alger of the American Revolution, it was Alexander Hamilton. But few of his achievements would have been recalled if not for his widow Eliza. Both Jefferson and John Adams were Hamilton's political enemies and continually sniped at him, even after his death. But his wife Eliza outlived them all. And during her widowhood of fifty years, until the age of 97, she kept the memory of "Her Hamilton" alive. Except for love letters which she burned, she collected and categorized every word he wrote and recorded every accomplishment he made.

She provided the information for a seven volume biography of Hamilton, securing Hamilton's place as one of America's greats among the founding fathers. Now the play of this man's life, "Hamilton," has become a miracle of the stage. It is one of the highest grossing plays of all times, a masterpiece among masterpieces.

Hamilton was born on the small Caribbean island of Nevis. His parents were Rachel Faucette, an unwed mother, and James Hamilton, a sea captain who later abandoned them. Earlier, Rachel had been duped into marrying Michael Laven, an inept and lying scoundrel. After five years she left Laven. This infuriated him and he had her jailed for adultery. When she was freed, Rachel left for the island of St. Kitts. Laven divorced her and had the Danish courts decree that Rachel was never again allowed to marry, condemning any further children she bore to illegitimacy.

In the early 1750's Rachel met Captain James Hamilton. Rachel bore James two children – James, then Alexander. Rachel was an intelligent business woman managing her own grocery store.

She was determined her children would be well educated. She had a library of 34 books which Alexander devoured. Though lacking formal schooling, he studied such books as Pope, Plutarch and Machiavelli. He was fluent in both French and English, an ability that served him well in years to come.

Rachel lived together with Captain James Hamilton for 15 years, until James abandoned them all in 1766. Although Captain Hamilton remained in the West Indies, Alexander never saw him again. In 1767, Rachel passed away. Alexander and his brother James were now orphans.

Between 1766 and 1769, Alexander's father had vanished, his mother had died, his cousin and legal guardian had committed suicide, and his aunt, uncle and grandmother had all died. James, 16 and Alexander, 14 were left alone, friendless and penniless.

That this abominable childhood produced such a productive, self-reliant individual seems little short of miraculous.

Alexander was fortunate to be taken into the home of Thomas Stevens, a well-respected merchant on St. Croix, where he befriended Thomas' son Edward, a year older than Alexander. Their personalities were similar - disciplined and persevering, fluent in French, versed in classical history, and outraged by slavery.

On St. Croix, Hamilton began clerking at Beekman and Cruger, an import-export company. At this young age, he learned to manage money, compute various currencies' prices, and comprehend the actions of both traders and smugglers. Then Beekman quit the business and Cruger left the island, leaving Hamilton in charge. He was sixteen.

Through this experience he learned the world of trade and global commerce. The experience later served him well, when as Secretary of the Treasury he formed the US Coast Guard and US Custom Services.

Hamilton saw the Caribbean Islands were at a trading disadvantage, being dependent on only one crop – sugar. This led to his future insistence that the new United States industrial base must have a diverse economy of manufacturing and agriculture, thereby greatly increasing the economic base of the new country.

There was little reading material available in the West Indies, but there was a newspaper – *The Royal Danish American Gazette*. Here Hamilton had four poems published, two of them influenced by Reverend Hugh Knox, a Presbyterian minister. In addition to his pastoral duties, Knox was a journalist and occasional editor. Their roles as fellow writers is probably where Hamilton met Knox.

August 1772 a terrible hurricane and earthquake devastated St. Croix with waves 15 feet high. Hamilton wrote a brilliant letter describing the catastrophe, which Knox published in *the Gazette*. It generated a sensation. Even the governor inquired of the author. Hamilton's letter led to a subscription fund being taken up by local businessmen to send this promising youth to North America to be educated. Hamilton had written his way out of poverty. He took a boat to Boston and never looked back. During the rest of his life, he never mentioned his childhood and life in the Caribbean.

After arriving in New York, he attended Elizabethtown Academy, a preparatory school in New Jersey. After he enrolled in King's College, now Columbia, Hamilton encountered politics pervasive on campus and became an active revolutionist.

As he was settling into his first year at King's College in 1773, the Boston Tea Party occurred. Hamilton wrote a paper defending the necessity of the event. Later, The British retaliated against the American colonies by passing the five Coercive Acts. These draconian measures, enforced by British troops, led to calling a Continental Congress in Philadelphia. George Washington was selected to be the commander-in-chief.

At this congress, Hamilton spontaneously spoke out in an electrifying speech resulting in the eruption of a sustained ovation. From then on, Hamilton commanded attention through the force and fervor of his words and was treated as a youthful hero of the cause.

Over the next year a war of words ensued between those who supported British rule and those who sought an independent country. Hamilton was often the writer of these articles seeking independence, usually under assumed names. Few would believe these brilliant writings could be written by a nineteen year old boy. While still a student at King's College, Hamilton continued to publish papers almost weekly supporting the creation of the new country.

In February, the Provincial Congress chose to form defenses to protect New York. Alexander Hamilton was assigned as Captain of the Artillery Company. He was a popular and trusted leader, and made a profound impression on several senior officers who took note of his bearing and leadership.

Britain chose to totally suppress the rebellion. Ships filled the harbors. British and Hessian troops occupied the city. Hamilton's artillery company continued to fight and did substantial damage to British ships.

Hamilton's artillery company reported directly to Washington, and Hamilton was with Washington at the battle of White Plains. Washington continued to be impressed with Hamilton's organizational gifts and military skills. In January 1777, Washington asked Hamilton to be his aide-de-camp and promoted him to Lieutenant Colonel.

Washington needed a writer who could express his thoughts. Hamilton soon gained more responsibility, frequently deciding what would be forwarded to Washington. He often rode with Washington into battle, and handled Washington's necessary diplomatic issues.

On a mission to Albany, Hamilton exhibited remarkable diplomacy. He was instructed to chastise General Putnam for not following commitments, and to relieve General Gates of two brigades. Successful in both, he was invited to dine with General Schuyler's family at their mansion. Here he first encountered Eliza Schuyler. They would meet again.

As the war moved on at a leisurely pace, it allowed Hamilton a fairly rich social life. He continued to flirt with the fashionable ladies who visited army headquarters. Because of his frisky and amorous manner, Martha Washington named her tomcat "Hamilton."

February, 1780, Washington's personal physician Dr. John Cochran arrived at Washington's winter headquarters accompanied by Eliza Schuyler. Hamilton was smitten with the young woman. They soon became engaged and were married in December. She was everything that Hamilton desired: smart, beautiful, gregarious and rich. With fairy-tale suddenness this orphan boy had joined a giant and prosperous clan.

Hamilton still yearned to be in battle. He asked Washington for permission to resign as aide-de-camp, and be assigned to the vanguard being sent south. While waiting for a command, Hamilton pondered the financial emergency gripping the states. The continental currency had collapsed. Hamilton sent the new Superintendent of Finance, Robert Morris, a 31-page letter outlining how to shore up American credit and create a national bank.

He also wrote the precursor for the Federalist Papers. This document stated, “We need a strong central Congress that can regulate trade, levy enforceable taxes and appoint military offices of every rank.”

On September 6, Hamilton was assigned to lead three battalions at Yorktown. In battle, Hamilton conquered or killed hundreds of British troops led by Lord Cornwallis, with few casualties among his own men. On October 18, 1781 with Hamilton in attendance, Cornwallis surrendered. Because of his valiant performance at Yorktown, Hamilton had established himself as a hero.

Colonel Hamilton returned to his new bride Eliza. On January 22, 1782 their son Philip was born. In April, Hamilton retired from the army. He then completed his law degree, passed the bar, and often contested Aaron Burr in court.

In May 1782, Robert Morris appointed Hamilton the receiver of continental taxes for New York. This led Hamilton to be chosen as one of five individuals to represent New York state at the Continental Congress in Philadelphia.

Here he saw the inadequacy, squabbling and lack of central management of the existing congress. He was despondent over what he saw.

It was determined that something substantial had to be done. A Constitutional Convention was needed. Washington, Hamilton, and John Madison did the early planning. Money problems pervaded all other issues. By October 1787, Hamilton had helped create the masterpiece, *The Federalist papers*, writing over 50 of the 85 papers that provided the basis for the American Constitution.

August 1788, Hamilton began encouraging the conference attendees to choose the first President of the new United States. In 1789, Washington was elected unanimously as President. John Adams was elected vice-president. At the inauguration, Washington expressed his disrespect of John Adams, who had adopted a princely manner. He commented on Adams' mimicry of royalty and dubbed him "His Rotundity."

Washington first offered the Secretary of the Treasury position to Robert Morris, but Morris declined for personal reasons. Morris recommended Hamilton.

Washington's initial cabinet consisted of Thomas Jefferson as Secretary of State, Henry Knox as Secretary of War and Hamilton as Secretary of the Treasury.

Hamilton began to develop his grand plan for a vigorous central government. He created a customs service, reviewed the duties collected, and deduced that they seemed suspiciously low. Being aware of smuggling operations, he determined guard boats were necessary. This led to the creation of the US Coast Guard in 1790.

Hamilton proposed a commercial alliance with Britain, laced with subtle threats and enticements, foreseeing when America would rival Britain as an economic power. He asked Madison, "What further taxes would prove least unpopular?"

Hamilton put forth a long-range financial plan relative to: Repayment of the debts to the soldiers who had not been paid; The farmers who had lost their lands; and The speculators who had risked their money to buy these debts. It was an extensive and complex plan, with the federal government assuming the states' debt. The plan created controversy and animosities among some, leading to a governmental stalemate.

Hamilton knew that the stalemate over the funding scheme could shatter the union. Simultaneously a debate was raging on the future location of the nation's capital. Hamilton wanted New York City as the permanent capital, others wanted Philadelphia. Southern states wanted it in southern territory.

As a compromise, Hamilton agreed to back Philadelphia as a temporary capital, and a 10-mile square site on the Potomac as the permanent site, if his financial plan was approved. Thus Hamilton won the battle of funding for the United States and Washington DC became the nation's capital.

Hamilton was a strong believer in the potential for business in the United States. He viewed entrepreneurship as the motivating factor of the economy. He fostered a cultural and legal setting for America which enabled a market economy to flourish.

Hamilton put forth the concept of a central bank. After extensive deliberation, the House passed the bill and Washington signed it into law over Madison's and Jefferson's objections.

One monetary problem was that coins varied in the content of gold, silver or copper that they contained. Some of these discrepancies were due to incompetence, some by design. Merchants were reluctant to accept any coinage, so Hamilton standardized US coinage. He created a central mint, with predefined weights and metallic composition of all coins.

The founding fathers of America all strived to bring America into being, but they were not all friends. Their primary divisiveness was their economic views. Many also felt verbally less skilled and were infuriated by Hamilton's oratorical ability to win every argument. Jefferson was a poor speaker.

After the war, Jefferson had proxies write 45 vilifying articles on Hamilton. He accused Hamilton of wanting to install a British-type monarchy. Sometimes these articles were fabricated stories. Often the writers accepted second hand gossip at face value and missed nuances that would cast matters in a different light. (Things haven't changed).

Washington tried to have his two cabinet members reach a truce, but despite his efforts, the war of words went on. Washington's election to a second term was a foregone conclusion. Adams again won the electoral vote for Vice-President.

In 1792 war had broken out between Britain and France. Though they despised one another, Hamilton and Jefferson joined forces to have Washington declare the "Act of Neutrality." The US would take neither side and would protect American ships from either British or French privateers. Hamilton penned essays in support of the Neutrality Proclamation.

As he continued to vilify Hamilton, Jefferson found James Madison to be a willing ally. Madison's essays upset President Washington. Jefferson also had the support of James Monroe, who published a newspaper. In this newspaper, essayist Philip Freneau accused Washington of "aping royalty in his presidential etiquette."

The war between Hamilton and Jefferson heated up, and Washington became fed up with the continual disagreements. By year end, Washington removed Jefferson from his cabinet.

In 1790 Hamilton had been led into an adulterous relationship with Maria Reynolds. She contacted Hamilton telling him her abusive husband had left her and she needed money. Upon arriving at her home to give her a 30-note bill, she offered herself instead.

This appeared to have been planned by her and her husband James, for he began to blackmail Hamilton to keep quiet about Hamilton's peccadilloes with his wife. Hamilton eventually paid Reynolds \$ 1,000. Hamilton himself acknowledged this affair and his blackmail payments, in the process of clearing his name about taking money from the treasury.

In 1793 Jefferson's party won the majority of seats in the congress. They initiated an inquest of Hamilton, asking for every scrap of paper from Hamilton relating to Treasury operations and insisting he had used Treasury money to make his blackmail payments. They demanded three meetings every week which Hamilton was required to attend. Hamilton was exhausted with this monumental addition to his responsibilities, along with a previous illness he had experienced. Despite extensive time spent and numerous charges brought against him, it was determined no wrongdoing had occurred by Hamilton and all charges were dismissed.

It was, however, discovered that chief prosecutor Albert Gallatin had violated the law, and Gallatin was forced to resign from the Senate.

Hamilton now believed his greatest opportunities lay behind him. With an ailing wife in need of him, on December 1, 1794, Hamilton resigned as Secretary of the Treasury. Though he was no longer in the cabinet, this did not stop his enemies from continuing to excoriate him. None ever spoke kindly of him.

Washington chose not to run for a third term. His energy was spent. He suffered from an aching back, bad dentures and rheumatism, and was tired of being criticized in the public press by a set of “irrational scribblers.” Washington asked Hamilton to write his final words as he left office. These appeared in print September 1796 and were praised across the country. Washington left office in 1797 and died 21 months later.

In the late 1798, after Washington had left office, war with the French was a possibility. Anticipating this, the concept of a standing army was established. Washington accepted being commander-in-chief but insisted Hamilton be his Inspector General and second-in-command. With excessive grumbling, President Adams agreed to this and to Hamilton’s promotion to Major General. As the de facto head of the army, Hamilton instituted plans for army and navy military academies. plans for military hospitals and a veterans’ administration. Adams never really endorsed the concept of an army or any of Hamilton’s plans. Sufficient funds to properly create an army were never provided.

After Washington's death in 1799, the plan for a standing army was dropped.

By the year 1800, Jefferson felt it was his destiny to be the heir to the Presidency. Jefferson did not know Aaron Burr, but he supported him as Vice-President due to being cognizant of Burr's abilities for political machinations. Through a series of political chicaneries, Burr was able to swing New York's electors to Jefferson and away from Adams.

Adams received 65 electoral votes and Pinckney, 64. Jefferson won 73 electoral votes, but Burr, who Jefferson had selected to be Vice-President, also received 73 votes. Since Jefferson and Burr tied for electoral votes, it threw the election to the House of Representatives.

Despite previous stated intentions, Burr campaigned to become President. After 36 ballots, two states changed their votes and Thomas Jefferson was elected President.

Jefferson now held Burr in contempt and ostracized him. Burr was excluded from every significant government association and had only Presidency of the Senate as his responsibility. As a minor courtesy Burr dined with Jefferson once every two weeks, but beyond that he had no contact with the President.

As much as Hamilton loathed Jefferson, he had unmitigated distrust and contempt for Burr issued vindictive diatribes in print. An example of Burr's felonious thinking was to tell Hamilton, "As head of the army, you have the power to rip up the Constitution and give us a proper one." Though what Hamilton wrote about Burr was true, Burr became more agitated with each essay. In 1801 a Captain Eacker gave a political speech where he castigated Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton's son Philip was present and became infuriated and attacked Eacker. This led to a duel in which Philip was killed.

Hamilton was trapped in a dilemma. He believed in rebuking insults to one's integrity and honor, but he became increasingly critical of dueling. He had advised his son not to shoot to kill, and Eacker as a gentleman had agreed. But Eacker violated his oath and mortally wounded Hamilton's son Philip, who died the next day. Hamilton was despondent and overwhelmed with grief.

Two years later, with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the New England states feared the new west would overrun them politically. Aaron Burr, aware that he would not be the vice-president for a second term, chose to run for governor of New York. Jefferson feared that New York, led by Burr, would merge with New England and **secede** from the union.

Burr was defeated in his campaign to be New York's governor. He blamed Hamilton for his loss, though Hamilton had played only a minor part in the election. Jefferson had much more effect by telling leaders of his party in New York that Burr had been excommunicated from Jefferson's Party.

Before the election a private dinner was held at the home of Judge John Taylor. Present were Hamilton, famed jurist James Kent, Dr. Charles Cooper and Judge Taylor. In ordinary dinner conversation they had expressed their concerns about Burr becoming governor and collectively denounced Burr. Dr. Cooper penned a letter describing Hamilton's description of Burr as "a dangerous man and one not to be trusted." By some means, this private letter appeared in the *New York Post*.

Seven weeks after the election, Burr received a copy of this letter and flew into a rage. In June, Burr contacted an associate of his, William Van Ness, to see him. Burr outlined a catalog of insults to Van Ness, culminating with the Cooper letter. This exchange drove Burr to challenge Hamilton to "an affair of honor."

Accepting a dueling challenge was compulsory for those of America's elite social class. A correspondence of letters transpired, but both men became more obstinate. The plans for a duel proceeded.

Hamilton decided to deliberately miss based on his moral convictions. Hamilton had not fired a shot since the Revolutionary War whereas Burr had been taking target practice for the past three months. The duel occurred on June 11, 1804 at Weehawken, New Jersey. Hamilton's shot went 12 feet above Burr's head and 4 feet wide, burying itself in the branch of a tree. Burr's shot, however, proved fatal. A dying Hamilton was taken back to his home. Only then was his wife Eliza and their children alerted to what had happened. He received communion from his associate Reverend Benjamin Moore, Episcopal bishop of New York and president of Columbia College. Hamilton said to Eliza, "Remember, my Eliza, you are a Christian."

June 12 at 2 PM, 31 hours after the fatal shot was fired, Hamilton passed on. New York poured out its heart to him. New York Supreme Court benches were draped in black. Church bells rang with a doleful sound. Ships in the harbor flew their flags at half mast.

But not all remembered him so fondly. Jefferson only commented, “There have been some remarkable deaths lately.” Jefferson and Adams continued to malign Hamilton’s reputation for the next two decades. James Madison wrote to John Monroe, “They were unaffected by Hamilton’s death, but he was concerned about the favorable newspaper reports of Hamilton’s successes in life.” It was only Hamilton’s widow Eliza, whose efforts of recording the achievements of Alexander Hamilton during his miraculous life, that kept his memory alive. She hired biographers and assistants in the process of her life-long project of memorializing her husband, writing his life story and countering the defamatory words of Jefferson, Adams and their ilk that besmirched “Her Hamilton.”

Eliza passed away at the age of 97, shortly before her story of her remarkable husband was completed. It was completed by her fifth child, John Church Hamilton.

He published a seven volume biography of *The Life of Alexander Hamilton*. He also published another seven volume documentary: *The Works of Alexander Hamilton; Containing His Correspondence, and his Political and Official Writings, Exclusive of the Federalist Papers*.

Over the years, Hamilton has been honored by the U.S. again and again. He has been on three US postage stamps and the \$500.00 EE savings bond.

Hamilton has been on US currency more than any other individual. He has been on the \$2.00, \$5.00, \$10.00, \$20.00, \$50.00, and \$1,000.00 bills. He has been on US currency since it began to be printed in 1861. Since 1928, he has been on the \$10.00 bill. There were plans to replace him on this bill with one of four women. However with the popularity of the show *Hamilton*, these plans have been cancelled – a case of art influencing governmental decisions.

From Eliza Hamilton's research and recordings, and her son John Church Hamilton's books, Ron Chernow wrote his book, *Hamilton*. In 2004 Lin-Manuel Miranda read Ron Chernow's book. Miranda is an actor, playwright, and lyricist. As he read it, he thought it would make a good play. Over the next several years, he developed an album of songs he called "The Hamilton Mixtape." Every draft and every song was reviewed by Chernow for accuracy, as Miranda continued to develop the play *Hamilton*. It evolved into a musical using hip-hop and rap music and lyrics, played by non-white actors.

In 2009, Miranda was invited to the White House to do a scene from *In the Heights*, his then-current Tony award winning play. Instead, Miranda performed the first song from "The Hamilton Mixtape," a rough version of what would become the opening song, "Alexander Hamilton."

"I'm working on a hip-hop album," said Miranda. "It's the concept of the life of someone I think embodies hip-hop – Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton. The audience, including President and Mrs. Obama, tittered politely. It seemed madness to tell the story of one of our founding fathers through rap.

Then the music started, introducing the central character and its themes: immigration, ambition, jealousy and how history was written. The music that grew out of this performance is – like America – a melting pot. It gave America a new origin story.

Hamilton first appeared Off-Broadway in February 2015 at The Public Theater. It was sold out for every performance. It moved On-Broadway to the Richard Rodgers Theatre in August 2015, where it received enthusiastic critical reception and unprecedented advance box office sales. In 2016 it received a record-breaking sixteen Tony nominations, winning eleven. It won a Grammy for Best Musical Theater Album and a Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Altogether, it has received over 30 national awards. It opened in London December 2017, where it won seven British Olivier awards. In 2016 Time magazine named Miranda as one of the hundred most influential people of the year.

Hamilton has now played in over twenty cities. In January, 2019 Miranda opened *Hamilton* in San Juan, Puerto Rico thus recognizing and honoring Miranda's Puerto Rican heritage and the place where he spent his summers as a youth.

Miranda has raised over \$43 million in contributions for aid to Puerto Rico in rebuilding after the devastating hurricane of 2017, and another \$15 million to benefit arts' organizations on the island.

Hamilton is already the second highest grossing play in history. To date, it has taken in revenue of several billion dollars. It is earning over \$3 million gross income a week. Its original cost to produce was \$ 12.5 million.

If you haven't seen Hamilton, plan on seeing it. Or listen to the sound track. There are 18 songs on it, every one worth hearing. You will have a much better comprehension of the lives of very human individuals who made America into the great country that it is. Our country – the country that we respect, that we enjoy and that we are proud to call our home.