Alexander Hamilton was born January 11, 1755, on the island of Nevis in the British West Indies. His father abandoned his family in 1765. In 1768, his mother died, leaving Hamilton and his older brother James orphans and penniless. The two boys went to live with their cousin, Peter Lytton. The following year, 1769, Lytton committed suicide, leaving Hamilton abandoned once again. He and James were separated. In 1772, a hurricane destroyed the town where Hamilton lived. Despite early tragedies, Hamilton impressed others with his intellect and strong work ethic. With the help of his employer and a local minister, Hamilton was able to raise enough money to move to the American Colonies. From these humble beginnings, Alexander Hamilton would go on to become an army officer, a lawyer, a politician, and a Founding Father of the United States.

Hamilton arrived in New York in the fall of 1772 and attended a grammar school in New Jersey. In 1773, he enrolled at Kings College (present-day Columbia University) in New York City. At the start of the Revolutionary War, he joined the local militia and rose to the rank of lieutenant. For his bravery in such battles as Harlem Heights, he gained the attention of George Washington. Hamilton served as Washington's assistant during the war. In 1777, he rode alongside the general in the battles at Brandywine, Germantown, and Monmouth.

Hamilton, along with the rest of Washington's troops, spent the winter of 1779–80 in Morristown, New Jersey. There, he met Elizabeth Schuyler, the daughter of Major General Philip Schuyler. Less than a year later, on December 14, 1780, Alexander and Elizabeth were married at the Schuyler home in New York.

In the fall of 1781, Hamilton decided to take a position under the Marquis de Lafayette. In October, he led one of the more important and dangerous attacks against British forces at the Battle of Yorktown. After the war, Hamilton returned to New York and studied law. He soon entered the world of politics, serving as a member of the Continental Congress in 1782 and 1783. In 1784, Hamilton founded the Bank of New York. The following year he joined the New York Manumission Society, which sought to abolish slavery in the state.

By the fall of 1786, it was clear that the United States government under the Articles of Confederation was weak and ineffective. In September, Hamilton and twelve other men representing five states attended a convention in Annapolis, Maryland. Although everyone at the convention recognized the need to strengthen the central government, there were not enough delegates present to enact any changes. Instead, they sent a report to all thirteen states and to Congress. Written by Hamilton, the report called for another convention to be held the following May in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Congress approved the convention in February. Hamilton was one of three New York representatives sent to Philadelphia.

On the first day of the convention, Hamilton and four other delegates were chosen to write the convention rules. Soon after, Hamilton and James Madison pressed the idea that revising the Articles of Confederation would not be enough to solve the problems of the federal government. After nearly four months of debate and compromise, the convention resulted in an entirely new framework of government. On September 28, Congress approved the final draft of the United States Constitution. It was then sent to the states for consideration. In an effort to persuade the states to ratify, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, John Jay, and others defended the document in a series of
letters known collectively as the Federalist Papers. By June, 1788, nine states had ratified the Constitution, the minimum number required for official adoption.

In 1789, President Washington chose Alexander Hamilton to serve as the first Secretary of the Treasury. Hamilton already knew how he was going to reduce the massive debt the nation had accumulated as a result of the war. First, he encouraged Americans to manufacture products rather than export raw materials to foreign countries. To protect American industries, and raise revenue, Hamilton proposed placing a tariff on imported goods. This “protective” tariff would encourage Americans to buy goods made in America. Moreover, the government could use the money it collected to build things like roads and bridges. Furthermore, the government could use the money, in the form of loans or subsidies, to encourage more Americans to begin new businesses.

In order to earn respect around the world, Hamilton knew the nation had to take responsibility for the debts owed to foreign countries. To help raise the necessary funds, Hamilton sought to protect trade through a friendly relationship with the British. He also sought to link wealthy people to the success of America so that they would, in turn, provide needed funds for the government by purchasing government bonds. In addition, he created a National Bank to standardize and control United States currency.

Hamilton became the leader of the Federalist Party, one of the first political parties in the nation. He and Thomas Jefferson, the leader of the Democratic-Republican Party, were long-time political enemies. Hamilton, who rose from poverty, envisioned a nation built on cities, manufacturing, and commerce. In contrast, Jefferson, who came from wealthy landed estates, argued for an agrarian economy.

Nevertheless, Hamilton’s hatred for Aaron Burr led him to support Jefferson during the presidential election of 1800. The election ended in a tie in the Electoral College. The House of Representatives, most of whom were Federalists, voted in favor of Jefferson to be president. Since Burr received the second greatest number of votes, he became vice president. This only deepened the political and personal rivalry between Burr and Hamilton.

In 1804 Burr, though still Vice President, ran for governor of New York. He sought the support of the Federalist Party, but Hamilton refused to support him. When Burr was defeated in the gubernatorial election, he blamed Hamilton for his loss. He challenged Hamilton to a duel, and they met in Weehawken, New Jersey, on July 11, 1804. Some witnesses reported Hamilton purposely fired high into the trees, but Burr took careful aim and fatally wounded Hamilton. Burr was charged with murder in New Jersey and New York, but was never arrested for the crime.

Although his story is often overshadowed by his death, Alexander Hamilton’s life is a true example of what has become known as the “American Dream.” He rose from poverty to become one of the most important figures in United States history. Thanks to Hamilton’s efforts as Treasury Secretary, the fledgling United States was able to pay back loans, establish credit, and eventually become the most prosperous nation on Earth.

1Ironically, these two men had once worked together in the New York Manumission Society.