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Trow's
Printing and Bookbinding Company,
201–213 *East Twelfth Street*,
New York.

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ALEXANDER HAMILTON, the ablest American jurist and statesman of the early constitutional era of the United States, was born at the island of Nevis, one of the Antilles under the dominion of England, on January 11, 1757. His father was a Scotch emigrant who had settled at St. Christopher, where he engaged in mercantile business. His mother was the daughter of a Huguenot named Faucette, a prosperous physician of Nevis. She had been the wife of a Mr. Irvine, also a physician, and during a brief married life dwelt at St. Christopher; but, owing to faults of his, she appears to have been driven to procure the judicial dissolution of the marriage, after which she returned to her father's home at Nevis, and there married James Hamilton. She bore to him

many sons, of whom none but Thomas and Alexander lived to maturity. Alexander, the youngest, was called after his paternal grandfather, who described himself "of Grange," which is said to have been the family seat in Ayrshire, Scotland. The master of Grange married, in 1730, Elizabeth, eldest daughter of Sir Robert Pollock; and young Hamilton, when he had risen to fame and station, said, "My blood is as good as that of those who plume themselves upon their ancestry." He styled his suburban residence, near New York, "The Grange."

His mother died while he was still a child, but not before he was capable of receiving and preserving distinct recollections of her. He derived from her an independent spirit, energy, self-reliance, and a disposition for metaphysical inquiries; and these qualities were conspicuous from an early age. His father's business misfortunes casting the boy upon the care of some of the mother's relatives, he was taken by them to their home at St. Croix, and there at school he first evinced that proficiency which marked him throughout his career. The opportunities for school training were at that time very lim-

ited at St. Croix, and when, in his thirteenth year, he entered the counting-house of Mr. Nicholas Cruger, at that port, he had already received all the benefit such schools were able to impart. This was in the autumn of 1769. In less than a year he was capable of more than clerkly duty, and Mr. Cruger, going on a foreign journey, left him in sole charge of the mercantile house. His business correspondence during this time, and the prosperity which attended the affairs, show that Mr. Cruger's confidence was not misplaced. This practical acquaintance with mercantile affairs was to be most serviceable to Hamilton. In the methodical and energetic management of matters of state, and in the prudent care of weighty interests, the influence of the knowledge and experience acquired by him in the counting-house at St. Croix is notable. During these three years he was the same close student that his after years more fully reveal. He read standard books, which laid open the theories of value and of trade, thinking out to feasible methods how those theories might be advantageously applied to the daily work he had in hand. He read history, poetry, and philosophy. The French language became

familiar to him by its general use in society and in the transactions of commerce, and he always wrote it with accuracy and elegance, and spoke it fluently and with the accent of native speech. The Rev. Hugh Knox, D.D., an Irishman, a divine of the Presbyterian Church, a scholar of distinction honored as such by the university of Glasgow, was Hamilton's first adequate preceptor, and was the first to discover the rich resources and useful tendencies of his intellectual and moral character. Under his friendly and gratuitous tutorship Hamilton supplied many parts in which his education was deficient. But the boy had aims beyond where he was; and when an incident, trivial in itself, led to an arrangement by which a more liberal education was opened to him, he left the West Indies, in October, 1772, and proceeded to New York. There, aided by letters from his friend Dr. Knox, he made the acquaintance of some of the leading men in that and the adjoining province of New Jersey. A year at the grammar school at Elizabethtown in the latter province proved sufficient to prepare him for the collegiate course, and in the spring of 1774 he entered as a student the King's (now Columbia) College, and, by

special privilege, pursued the usual studies according to a plan which he laid out for himself.

When, in 1774, the enforcement of the Boston "Port Bill" aroused even the most moderate in the other colonies to sympathize with the province of Massachusetts Bay, Hamilton studied the political questions relating to the controversy between the colonies and the parliament of England with his habitual research and enlightened reasoning. He was convinced that his duty as an Englishman required him to take part with the colonists against the assertion of the "omnipotence of parliament." The famous tract by Lord Somers entitled *The Judgment of whole Kingdoms and Nations*, &c., which repudiates this as a thing unknown to the law of England, was republished in 1773 at Philadelphia, and widely circulated throughout the provinces, in aid of the cause of colonial resistance. Its effect upon the mind of Hamilton is to be observed in his writings of this time. With his usual ardor he now busied himself in public discussion. Before his eighteenth year ended his reputation as an orator and writer was established. His chief opponent at this period was the distinguished divine Samuel Seabury,

who a few years later (1783) was consecrated in Scotland the first bishop of the United States of America. The fame of their debates spread over the whole country, and Hamilton was the acknowledged "oracle" of the party of moderation, with which he acted.

While still a collegian he joined the military of the province of New York, and began as the captain of its first company of artillery employed in the continental service. To qualify himself for such a position he had, under the immediate instruction of an experienced soldier and officer, not only studied the theoretic art of war, but engaged with others in receiving daily for several months practical lessons in the field-drill. He was active with his company of artillerists at the battle on Long Island, at Harlem Plains, at Chatterton's Hill, New Brunswick, Trenton, and Princeton. At Harlem Heights he first attracted the attention of Washington, and again at New Brunswick excited the commander's admiration by the courage and skill with which he held in check the advance of the British forces, while the American army was retreating toward the Delaware. When the army went, in January, 1777, into winter quarters at Morristown,

Hamilton, now grown in the friendship and confidence of Washington, resigned his command, became Washington's private secretary, and was raised to the rank of lieutenant-colonel. Hamilton remained on the staff until April, 1781, when an unusual and hasty warmth of temper on both sides led to the severance of this particular connection, but their mutual friendship remained and even increased. He was married in 1780 to Elizabeth, second daughter of General Philip Schuyler, a distinguished soldier and statesman of the Revolution. For a brief space Hamilton occupied his time in exposing the inherent defects of the existing confederation by a series of excellent papers known as *The Continentalist.* But the country once more needed his more active aid; he returned to the army, led one most brilliant attack, and was present with a command at the surrender of Lord Cornwallis.

The war to maintain the declaration of independence was fought, but it did not make nor leave the United Colonies a nation. A new system of government and "a coercive union" were insisted upon by Hamilton and other foremost men as necessary. But many obstacles

stood in the way. Historical prejudice and the selfishness of local interests were against concessions to a union of the States. Traditional dread of centralized government, traditional dread of an hereditary aristocracy, dread that a national legislature, if allowed full authority, might assert and act upon the repudiated doctrine of an omnipotence of parliament, dread that a supreme general government might absorb, or even usurp, under the plea of care for the public welfare, those local interests which the States were now able to maintain, and which the Confederation was meant to protect—the concurrence of these several causes contributed to bring out opposition whenever a more perfect union was proposed.

The first suggestion toward the establishment of an adequate and permanent government came, as it is now conceded, from Hamilton. It was contained in a letter written by him, September 3, 1780, to James Duane, a delegate from New York to the Congress at Philadelphia. He wrote a yet more remarkable letter the following year (April 30) to Robert Morris, the famous financier of the Revolution, in which not a mere suggestion but a matured and complete

scheme of national finance, including a plan for a United States bank, was discussed and laid out. These letters are, indeed, the *principia* of the American government in its organization and administration. When the convention of delegates met at Annapolis, Maryland, in September, 1786, the influence of Hamilton upon the destinies of his country began to be favored by circumstances. Although the object of that convention was limited to simply commercial projects, yet, under his and Madison's prudent management, an address was finally issued which brought about the great and conclusive convention of 1787 at Philadelphia. The form of government then instituted is, in its groundwork and its principal features, a restoration and perfecting of the ancient constitutional liberties of England. While the particular plan proposed by Hamilton was, as were other projects, laid aside, yet it was the spirit of the system conceived by him which then prevailed, and has since been a controlling principle in the administration of government. Guizot says of him that "there is not in the constitution of the United States an element of order, of force, of duration, which he did not powerfully contribute

to introduce into it and to cause to predominate." It was at this period that Hamilton, in association with John Jay and James Madison, wrote his parts of *The Federalist*.

At the convention, called by the State of New York, which met at Poughkeepsie, on the Hudson River, June, 1788, to ratify the proposed National Constitution, the superb ability of Hamilton for organizing and leading intelligent public opinion displayed itself fully. The utility of candid, earnest, reasonable debate has seldom been more approved by its results. A most disheartening minority of the delegates when the convention first met were in favor of the Constitution. When Hamilton ceased his efforts, not only had he gained to his support a majority, but even ultimately he had the aid and vote of his most eloquent and most powerful antagonist. At length Hamilton arose in the convention, and, stating that Virginia had ratified the Constitution, and that the Union was thereby an accomplished fact, moved that they cease their contentions and add New York to the new empire of republican states. That day his labors culminated in entire success.

Washington, when forming the cabinet for

his first presidential administration, naturally turned to Robert Morris as the proper person to take the secretaryship of the treasury; but Morris declined, insisting that Hamilton was "the one man in the United States" fitted by studies and ability to create a public credit and bring the resources of the country into active efficiency. Washington found his former military secretary more than equal to the task. The fiscal affairs of the country were at once organized, and prosperity quickly came. Hamilton achieved an immediate success which all agree is without parallel. He also was really the organizer of the administration of the new Government, and in its chief department it remains to this day without change. His state papers, written during the two presidential terms of Washington, are regarded as of the highest character for knowledge of the case, wisdom, and practical method; and his report on the constitutionality of a national bank, in which he fully develops his favorite policy of the implied powers of the Government, and the other report, nominally upon manufactures, which embraces in its range every pursuit of human industry susceptible of encouragement under such a gov-

ernment as he wished to see that of the United States, are those productions in which the rare qualities of his mind abundantly manifest their force and precision. President Van Buren declared the latter paper to be "Hamilton's masterpiece."

After these labors Hamilton, though offered the position of chief-justice of the United States, remained at the bar of his adopted State. He soon rose to its highest rank, and was esteemed its unrivalled leader. As a citizen, and without the desire of public office, he continued always actively interested in public affairs. His intense and uncompromising moral nature engendered many political antipathies, though personally few were more loved for amiability and respected for their honor. Among those men whom he deemed it a patriotic duty to defeat in a personal ambition was Aaron Burr, the vice-president of the United States. Party lines were marked and party spirit fierce. Burr appreciated what would be the effect of Hamilton's continued opposition to his political designs, and knew that he was a man to be neither conciliated in this respect nor outmanœuvred. He eagerly watched for an opportunity to impute offence. A trivial

and inadequate occasion soon came. An indiscreet person repeated a remark which he said Hamilton made in a familiar conversation at the house of a common friend, to the purport that he had a "despicable" opinion of Burr. Upon this gossip Burr acted; and so subtle was the manner with which he managed the correspondence for his determined purpose that he, according to the tone of society at that time, made it, in Hamilton's misconception, an obligation, due to his continued usefulness in public affairs, to accept a challenge. They met early on the morning of July 11, 1804, at a sequestered place beneath the hills of Weehawken, on the west bank of the Hudson River, opposite to the city of New York. Hamilton was mortally wounded at the first fire. As he fell, his own pistol was by accident discharged, and the ball struck the ground near him. He did not himself intend to fire. He died the following day, in the forty-eighth year of his age. His death was considered a national calamity. Eight of his children, four boys and four girls, were left to his widow's care. She survived him half a century, dying at the age of ninety-seven, and during all that

time she remained attired in the widow's dress of the early times.

The peculiarity of Hamilton's genius consisted of qualities which eminently distinguish him from the other great personages of his time. The epithet precocious was never applicable to him, for whatever he did, even in his boyhood, was accomplished with facility, and resulted in a perfection that the works of latter years did not exceed. He was ever mature. His intellect pierced through the most subtle and profound problems, and apparently without the labor of experiment. He "could see consequents yet dormant in their principles," or, as Talleyrand said of him on more than one occasion, "he divined." "Hamilton avait *deviné* l'Europe," was the reason given by the prince when he compared him to Fox and Napoleon. His industry was marvellous, and his learning equal to the creative faculty of his mind. The fecundity, power, vigor, and maturity of his intellectual works as fully impressed his contemporaries as they have since impressed posterity.

His political writings seem, in the estimation of judicious and eminent writers in America,

Great Britain, and France, to place him in the first rank of master minds. The most widely known of these writings are those contained in *The Federalist*. Translations of them have been published at Paris (the first as early as 1792), and were studied by the chief public men of that period. It has been asserted that they exhibit an extent and precision of information, a profundity of research, and an accurateness of understanding which would have done honor to the most illustrious statesmen of ancient or modern times, that for comprehensiveness of design, strength, clearness, and simplicity they have no parallel (*Blackwood's Magazine*, January, 1825, and *The Edinburgh Review*, No. 24). Talleyrand called the attention of European statesmen to the merits of *The Federalist* as a copious source of correct maxims and profound thought; and Guizot says that, "in the application of elementary principles of government to practical administration, it was the greatest work known to him." Laboulaye has expressed at great length his deliberate judgment of Hamilton's genius and wisdom, and of the consummate ability with which he called into existence a new system of government and organized its admin-

istration (*Histoire des États-Unis*, tome iii.). And Hamilton's own countrymen have not been less emphatic in grateful acknowledgment, especially Chief-Justice Marshall, the judicial interpreter and expounder of the principles of the American Constitution.

In person Hamilton was below the medium height, slender, almost delicate in frame, instinct with life, erect and quick in gait; his general address was graceful and nervous, indicating the energy, exactness, and activity of his mind. His complexion was bright and ruddy, his hair light, and the whole countenance decidedly Scottish in form and expression. His political enemies frankly spoke of his manner and conversation, and regretted its irresistible charm. The best portraits of him are by Trumbull, Wiemar, Ames, and there is a good bust by Cerrachi.

For full memoirs of Hamilton, see the elaborate *Life*, in 7 vols., by John Church Hamilton, one of his sons, New York, 1857; the *Life* by Dr. Renwick, published in *Harper's Family Library; Life* by Morse, 2 vols., Boston, 1876; Edouard Laboulaye's *Histoire des États-Unis*, tome iii., Paris, 1870; Curtis's *History of the Constitution of the United States*, 2 vols., New

York, 1858; Reithmüller's *Hamilton and his Contemporaries*, London, 1864; Bancroft's *History of the United States*, in the 7th and succeeding vols.; and Shea's *Life and Epoch of Hamilton*, 2d ed., New York, 1880.