

ON THE BOOKSHELF

“Alexander Hamilton: Revolutionary”

By Martha Brockenbrough (Feiwei and Friends, an imprint of MacMillan)

For American History Month, I wanted to share again this recent bio about one of America’s Founding Fathers. I talk to the author ON THE BOOKSHELF on WTBF-AM/FM.

No one born outside the US can be president because Thomas Jefferson wanted to make sure than Hamilton never would! Alexander was born in the West Indies, and his parents weren’t married at the time. He had a difficult early life, orphaned young, and publicly reviled as “whore-child” At age 14 he was homeless, penniless and had no hope for the future, but AH was smart, resourceful and ambitious.

He became a merchant’s clerk, keeping the books, running the business, doing the legal work, learning about supply chains, and how to keep the pirates away. He was awarded a scholarship to study in New York City, the ship caught fire, he led the efforts to quench the blaze, and they made it to Boston. He arrived on NYC in 1772. Alexander charmed everyone.

He enrolled in academy six months then went to King’s College. He was industrious and studious. While in college, the mood of the colonies was increasingly toward conflict with England. At age 19 he addressed a crowd in the commons after the Brits had closed the Port of Boston. When war came, in March 1776 Hamilton became captain of the NY Provincial Company of Artillery. He treated them well, provisioning them from his own pocket.

General Washington took note of Hamilton’s organizational skills. He joined the staff of the Commander-in-Chief; a skilled wordsmith, he handled the general’s huge correspondence. Soon he was thinking and writing on GW’s behalf, and was sent to procure clothing, blankets, horses, food and other vital supplies. He beat several serious illnesses, survived drowning, and created a plan to provision the starving, freezing army at Valley Forge. Though AH tried to leave the staff, GW wouldn’t let him go.

Hamilton met and married Eliza Schulyer in 1780. When GW and allies bottled up Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown in the autumn of 1781, it effectively ended the war. AH collapsed in exhaustion. Two years later when the treaty was signed, he was outraged at the treatment of the defeated Tories by his fellow revolutionaries. He helped lay the foundation for the modern American banking system. A new Constitution was birthed in 1787, and his voluminous writings (known as the *Federalist Papers*) provided much of the inspiration for a strong federal government. This put him at odds with Thomas Jefferson, who would remain a rival and foe the rest of his life.

He became the first Secretary of the Treasury, but scandal and his bitter rivals dogged him. AH would die in a duel with the VP Aaron Burr, a man who had saved him during the War, but also killed AH’s son exactly one year earlier in a duel.