

HAMILTON AND THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR



Alexander Hamilton was a student at King's College (now Columbia University) when the Revolutionary War broke out in 1775. While still a student, he began drilling with a New York volunteer militia company. The next year, after the war had closed his school and interrupted his studies, Hamilton was named captain of the New York Provincial Artillery Company. In this role he helped defend New York when the British invaded, fighting in the major campaigns of 1776 and early 1777, including the battles of Kip's Bay, White Plains, Trenton, and Princeton.

Hamilton was self-taught as a military officer. He read artillery manuals and military books, and studied geometry and physics. He probably read texts such as British author John Muller's *A Treatise of Artillery* to understand the science of loading and firing cannons. Hamilton took pride in marching and drilling the artillerymen he commanded. Other officers noticed his talents as a leader.

Hamilton's training made his artillerymen among the best in the army, and their hard work paid off. In 1776, intense fire from Hamilton's artillery helped General Washington win battles in Trenton and Princeton, New Jersey, securing the first surrenders of British and Hessian (German soldiers who supplemented the British Army) troops to Washington's army.

WASHINGTON'S AIDE-DE-CAMP

Following his military successes in New Jersey, Hamilton was recruited to join General George Washington's team of assistants, called aides-de-camp, in March 1777. Hamilton was promoted to lieutenant colonel and for the next four years, was one of Washington's most valued staff members. Hamilton had a variety of responsibilities, including writing letters to military and political leaders, and advising Washington on battle plans. Hamilton served alongside Washington at Valley Forge, Monmouth, and Morristown, and earned the general's trust. He wore a green silk ribbon or sash across his chest to show his position as aide-de-camp. After leaving his role as aide-de-camp, he successfully led an assault during the Siege of Yorktown in 1781. This contributed to the surrender of General Lord Charles Cornwallis, which essentially guaranteed American independence.

WHO SHOULD GET PAID?

Despite years serving in the army, Hamilton later issued financial plans as Secretary of the Treasury that put great pressure on his fellow veterans.

Strapped for cash during the War, the states and Continental Congress issued bonds and pay slips (government IOUs) to civilians and soldiers who supported the war effort. In the years following the war, these IOUs lost value in the deflated economy. Many poor veterans had a difficult choice to make: wait for their pay slips to reach full value, which could take years, or sell them for cash at a reduced value. Many veterans sold their pay slips to buy food and clothing. Merchants purchased the IOUs from veterans, at reduced prices, under their belief that they would eventually redeem them at full value.

As Secretary of the Treasury, Hamilton felt it was important for the newly established Federal Government to pay its debts. The question was, who would the government pay? The veterans who were issued the pay slips? Or the merchants who purchased them from the veterans?

Although he himself was a veteran and had commanded some of these men who now found themselves facing financial hardship, Hamilton argued that the government should pay the bearer (holder) of the IOU. Although some, including James Madison, felt the government should honor its veterans by issuing the pay promised to them, Hamilton felt this sort of treatment would undermine the faith of businesses and wealthier Americans in their new government. Hamilton wanted to reward those who had taken a risk and invested in the financial success of the United States.