

Alexander Hamilton, who was born out of wedlock (and probably of “mixed race”) on the tiny island of Nevis in the West Indies, became one of the most influential of the founders of the United States. The circumstances of his birth meant that he was barred from attending schools on the island, and what little education he had came from female tutors and from his mother, whose small collection of books were the only thing left to him when she died in his thirteenth year, his father having abandoned the family three years earlier (those books appear to have included Plutarch’s *Lives* and Machiavelli’s *Prince*). Hamilton’s personal experience of oppression and life as an outcast made him unique among the founders, as did the close-up view of the horrors of slavery he received as a child of the Caribbean.

Four years later, when he was seventeen, Hamilton’s talents attracted the attention of a patron who raised the funds to send him to North America, and he began the formal study of Latin and Greek at a Presbyterian school in Elizabethtown, New Jersey. Two years later he went on to study at King’s College (now Columbia University), where Latin and Greek were a central part of the curriculum.

Although Hamilton came late to Latin and Greek and his classical education was far less extensive than that of men like Jefferson and Adams, his formidable intelligence and industry made him their equal. Indeed, as I shall argue, his dedication to the ideals displayed in the writings of authors like Cicero and Plutarch made him their superior. The hardships Hamilton endured as a child and his personal awareness of the inhumanity of slavery made him a lifelong opponent of oppression and cruelty. For him classical learning was far more than a mark of gentility and a key to social advancement. The great classical texts, which he read as living witnesses, not as objects of antiquarian interest, were a challenge and a call to action that provided him with a means to articulate his vision of a just society and a framework for achieving it.