Alexander Hamilton was born and raised in the Caribbean and had a very difficult childhood. His father, James Hamilton, abandoned his family when Alexander was ten years old. The young man did not receive much of an education and was forced to work at an import-export business to help support his mother. Tragically, she succumbed to a tropical fever when he was thirteen years old, leaving him and his brother to make their own way in the world.

The chances that Alexander Hamilton would be successful in life seemed very remote. Fortunately, Hamilton had some excellent mentors, who helped give the determined young man a chance. His employer taught him a great deal about the business and the youth applied himself diligently to mastering the complexities of accounting, international trade, and shipping.

A Presbyterian minister moved to the capital where Hamilton lived and introduced him to the Christian faith, principles of liberty, and the ideas of the Scottish Enlightenment in his vast library. Finally, several important local men recognized Hamilton's natural genius and work ethic and decided to pay for his education in the United States. It was a golden opportunity to succeed in life, provided he continued to earn it.

When Hamilton arrived in the United States, he lacked sufficient academic preparation to attend Princeton University, where his sponsors wanted him to attend college. He hit the books hard at a preparatory school and quickly finished the necessary work. When he met with Princeton President Rev. John Witherspoon, Hamilton felt so confident in his abilities and diligence that he asked to complete the four-year education in only two years.
Witherspoon turned him down, so Hamilton attended Columbia University instead. He was a successful student when the larger events leading to the American Revolution intervened and provided another opportunity for him to demonstrate his commitment to liberty.

Hamilton was drilling an artillery company in New York when the war moved there after the siege of Boston ended. The British invaded New York with a massive armada carrying 32,000 redcoats and German mercenaries. The enemy army and navy easily drove the Americans out of New York, across the Hudson River, and deep into New Jersey. Many colonial militiamen had their enlistments expire, and they returned to their farms in the fall of 1776.

Nevertheless, General George Washington persevered in holding the Continental Army together and battling the British. Throughout the long retreat, the general noted the great courage and leadership of Hamilton, particularly during the daring attacks across the Delaware at Trenton and Princeton, where the artillery played a significant role in the success of the battles. Washington invited Hamilton to join his staff as an aide because the general believed that merit, not birth or wealth, should determine who advanced in the army.

Hamilton accepted the position and was one of Washington’s most trusted aides for the duration of the war. Washington entrusted Hamilton with sensitive correspondence with generals and members of Congress, and sent the twenty-two-year-old aide on several important missions. Hamilton bravely endured the horrors of Valley Forge and fought at Washington’s side at the battles of Brandywine, Germantown, Monmouth Courthouse, and Yorktown, the decisive battle that essentially ended the war. At Yorktown, Hamilton demonstrated tenacious courage by leading an audacious charge on a redoubt that turned the tide in favor of the Continental Army and their French ally.

Hamilton had won fame and rose to an important position because of his continued dedication to the American cause of liberty. He contributed even more to the founding of America during the next decade. After studying law and passing the bar exam to support his growing family, he became strongly committed to serving the public good. He was a representative in New York’s government as well as in the national Congress.

In 1786, he attended the Annapolis Convention to strengthen the Articles of Confederation and attended the Constitutional Convention the following year. After the Constitution was written, Hamilton demonstrated perhaps the greatest example of diligent effort in his life. He was the author of fifty-one Federalist essays in defense of the Constitution during the debate over ratification.

In July 1788, he overcame overwhelming opposition to the Constitution in the New York Ratifying Convention and was instrumental in securing ratification. His work in heralding support in New York as well as his authorship of the Federalist essays deserve a large share of the credit for helping the Constitution become the supreme law of the land.
Hamilton had invested a great deal of time and energy into the creation of the new Constitution and wanted the “more perfect Union” to succeed. He believed it was critical that Washington serve as the first president and virtually demanded that he come out of retirement to serve. In turn, President Washington tapped Hamilton, who was a financial genius, to become the first Secretary of the Treasury. At the request of Congress, Hamilton produced several important reports—the Report on Public Credit, a proposal for a National Bank, and a Report on Manufactures – which contained his proposals to put the United States on a strong financial foundation. Congress passed measures instituting the first two reports, and President Washington signed the bills. As a result, the American economy prospered. Hamilton continued to serve as Washington’s main confidant and policy advisor on many other important issues until retiring to his legal practice in 1795.

Hamilton was deeply involved in politics and practiced law for the rest of his life, which was tragically cut short in a duel with Aaron Burr in 1804. He left behind a large family and a legacy as an important founder of the American political system and economy. His diligent effort to rise above his humble circumstances and succeed in life is a classic American rags-to-riches story.