

Overview:

Natural disasters affect everyone. No matter what region of the world you reside in, you will probably experience a natural disaster or extreme weather, such as a hurricane, earthquake, tornado, blizzard, tsunami, forest fire, dust storm, or a flood. Alexander Hamilton, an important Founder of the United States, experienced first-hand the hardship and devastation of natural disaster. As a teenager living on St. Croix he witnessed a hurricane strike the island on August 31st, 1772. Destruction spread through the neighboring islands of Nevis and St. Kitts with earthquakes and tidal waves that same afternoon. Hamilton was just seventeen years old.

Having worked as a clerk at Beekman and Cruger, Hamilton had learned how to write in an articulate and expressive manner, despite never receiving a formal education prior to college. Going through this devastation as an orphaned youth, Alexander Hamilton wrote a detailed letter describing the hurricane, a week after the storm, to his father, James Hamilton. Hamilton's ability to convey the scene and entertain with prose caught the eye of a gentleman neighbor, who published the letter in the *Royal Danish American Gazette* newspaper on October 3rd. Hamilton's language was so descriptive and vivid that he had to reassure everyone that it was true:

“I am afraid, Sir, you will think this description more the effort of imagination than a true picture of realities. But I can affirm with the greatest truth, that there is not a single circumstance touched upon, which I have not absolutely been an eye witness to.”

From Alexander Hamilton to *The Royal Danish American Gazette*, 6 September 1772:
<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-01-02-0042>

Hamilton painted a picture of the destruction of the landscape, the pain of the people around him, and his fears on that frightening night.

Grades 9-12

Purpose of this lesson:

- To use *Hamilton* and hurricanes to discuss the effects and impact of natural disasters. In addition, students will use the imagery of a natural disaster to produce a piece of original writing that shows student synthesis of Hamilton's primary document and the connection between the text and their own experiences.

Next Generation Science Standards:

HS-ESS3-1 Earth and Human Activity

Construct an explanation based on evidence for how the availability of natural resources, occurrence of natural hazards, and changes in climate have influenced human activity.

Common Core Standards:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7

Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

Lesson:

Recent hurricanes such as Hurricane Irma, Hurricane Harvey, and Hurricane Katrina have devastated regions from Puerto Rico and across the United States. There is a strong likelihood that your students have either experienced a natural disaster or know someone who has. This interdisciplinary lesson aims to connect Science, Writing, and Social Studies, by using the story of Alexander Hamilton's 1772 letter in the *Royal Danish American Gazette* together with the science behind hurricanes. The lesson will begin with an exploration of the science behind hurricanes. Students will then read Hamilton's descriptive letter about the St. Croix hurricane. From this, students will be prompted to write a letter describing an eyewitness experience to a natural disaster or a weather event.

Activator:

Start off the class by asking the students to raise their hands if they have ever experienced a natural disaster, or if they know someone that has? This will start the conversation about how many

people are affected by such hazards. Depending on the region in which your school is located, you could talk about your local natural hazard (i.e. New England schools could talk about blizzards). Since today's lesson will mostly feature a hurricane, play this National Geographic video about hurricanes <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zP4rgvu4xDE>

Activity #1: The Science Behind Hurricanes & Hamilton's Letter

This link, <https://pmm.nasa.gov/education/lesson-plans/hurricanes>, offers a PowerPoint presentation about natural hazards in general, and hurricanes specifically. Use this to educate students about the science behind hurricanes. Students will also learn about technologies that can help diminish the destructive effects of natural disasters. This link also provides a teacher guide to supplement additional knowledge that you might need about hurricanes.

After talking about the science behind hurricanes, explain the story of Hamilton on St. Croix when the hurricane hit in 1772 and how he wrote a letter to his father that was later published in the *Royal Danish American Gazette*. Provide background information to the class that is discussed in the overview section. Pass out the full version of Hamilton's 1772 letter (which is reachable here <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-01-02-0042>). Have the students work in pairs to read the letter. There is also an audio reading of the letter listed in the resource section for students requiring accommodation. After reading the letter, ask the students to determine Hamilton's tone and the main points of the letter.

Activity #2: Writing About Their Own Natural Disaster or Extreme Weather Experience

For a writing assignment, tell the students that they will be writing for a newspaper or a magazine. For their publication, they will have to write a letter, similar to how Hamilton wrote a letter to his father, that describes a weather event that they have experienced.

An optional Assignment:

You can have the students listen to the *Hamilton* song, "Hurricane", and from that have them write their own verses to a song about the event that they described in their letter.

Resources used:

- National Geographic video on hurricanes <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zP4rgvu4xDE>
- site offering science behind hurricane in the form of a PowerPoint and Teacher Guide PDF <https://pmm.nasa.gov/education/lesson-plans/hurricanes>,
- Audio of Hamilton's Letter: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QJ1tEKEJJaM> (start video at 3:20)

Additional Links:

- Hurricane bingo https://secoora.org/hurricane_bingo_terms/ (grades 5-12)