

Overview:

Natural disasters affect everyone. No matter what region in the world you reside, you might experience a natural disaster or extreme weather, such as an earthquake, tornado, blizzard, hurricane, tsunami, forest fire, dust storm, or a flood. Alexander Hamilton, a founding father, was not immune to the hardships of natural disasters. While living on St. Croix, Hamilton worked as a clerk at Beekman and Cruger. From having to keep track of currencies, freights, and commodities, Hamilton learned how to write in an articulate and expressive manner, despite never receiving a formal education prior to college. On August 31st, 1772, a hurricane struck St. Croix. Destruction carried through the neighboring islands of Nevis and St. Kitts with earthquakes and tidal waves that same afternoon. Hamilton was just seventeen years old. Having gone 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 entertain with prose caught the eye of a gentleman, who later published the letter in the *Royal Danish American Gazette* on October 3rd. His language was so descriptive and animated that he even had to write,

“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 wrote about the destruction of the landscape, the pain of the people around him, and about his reflection of the fear he felt on that frightening night.

Grades 6-9

Purpose of this lesson:

- To use *Hamilton* and hurricanes to discuss the effects 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.

Common Core Standards:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7

Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.9

Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.6

Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose (e.g., loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts).

Lesson:

The recent hurricanes, such as Hurricane Irma, Hurricane Harvey, and Hurricane Katrina, have devastated regions Cape Verde and The United States, for example. There is a strong likelihood that your students have either experienced a natural disaster or know someone that 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 resides, you could talk about your local natural hazard (i.e. New England schools could talk about blizzards). Since today's lesson will mostly be on hurricane, play this National Geographics 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 hazards. 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 later got 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 that need an 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 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.

Resources used:

- National Geographics 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)