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Hamilton: The Constitutional Clashes That Shaped a Nation
Exhibit Walkthrough

On March 23, the National Constitution Center will open a compelling new exhibit in its Annenberg Gallery highlighting the competing ideas of Alexander Hamilton and his legendary rivals. Created by the National Constitution Center, ***Hamilton: The Constitutional Clashes That Shaped a Nation*** explores Hamilton's fraught relationships with James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Aaron Burr. Examining the personalities and constitutional debates that shaped America — including the scope of the national government, the establishment of a standing army, the creation of a federal banking system, and more — the exhibit provides an intimate look into Alexander Hamilton's enduring role in the constitutional and political arguments that continue to create sparks to this day.

Throughout ***Hamilton: The Constitutional Clashes That Shaped a Nation***, visitors are introduced to Alexander Hamilton and his fellow Founding Fathers' conflicting visions of the Constitution and the future of the federal government. The exhibit narrative begins in 1789, when the national government began operating under the new U.S. Constitution. In each section, the exhibit highlights Hamilton's constitutional clashes with a different rival, exploring their competing arguments and revealing the fragility of the new nation.

Hamilton argued for a powerful, centralized government in order to bolster the economy. Hamilton's proposed treasury plans sounded much like a monarchy to James Madison, the "Father of the Constitution" and Hamilton's fellow *Federalist Papers* author. On display will be a 1792 essay (American Philosophical Society Library), anonymously published in the *National Gazette*, in which Madison described the enemies of republican government. Without mentioning Hamilton by name, Madison directed his criticism at the treasury secretary, revealing their public dispute and escalating tension.

Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson also feared a reversion to a monarchy, made clear by a to-do list regarding the structure and role of government. In a "Note of agenda to reduce the government to true principles" (Library of Congress, 1792), Jefferson elaborated on his main divergence with Hamilton: limiting the power of the national government and bolstering that of the states, a question that still persists today.

While arguing with his fellow Founding Fathers, Hamilton was keenly aware of his sense of honor, as visitors will discover in the third section of the exhibit. In an effort to clear his name of public corruption charges, Hamilton chose to publish the Reynolds Pamphlet (American Philosophical Society Library, 1797), a 95-page refutation of these charges, in which he admitted to adultery. As visitors will see in the original pamphlet placed alongside Hamilton's portable writing desk from the late 1700s (Burke Library at Hamilton College), the notion of public honor outweighed any sense of Hamilton's personal shame, yet the document ultimately tarnished his political career.

In the late 1790s, Hamilton faced another rival — this time a member of his own political party. President John Adams and Alexander Hamilton clashed over issues raised by the potential war with

France, including the establishment of a standing army. These issues caused Hamilton to question Adams's fitness to be president. Visitors can view a lengthy letter published by Hamilton in 1800 (The Historical Society of Pennsylvania), in which he revealed Adams's inadequacy as president and the need for a change in leadership.

The final clash of Hamilton's life came with Vice President Aaron Burr, whom Hamilton believed was an unprincipled man. Frustrated by Hamilton's persistent efforts to oppose his political career, Burr wrote to Hamilton in June 1804 with language used to initiate a duel. In this section of the exhibit, visitors will learn about dueling, see the handwritten arrangements (New-York Historical Society, 1804) for this infamous duel as well as exact replicas of the original pistols (JPMorgan Chase Corporate History Collection, ca. 1976), and begin to understand what motivated these men to settle their disagreements on the dueling grounds.

Hamilton's death at the hands of Burr left his admirers to mourn and his rivals to shape his legacy. These enemies crafted an enduring image, while his family and friends tried to defend his memory. In this final exhibit section, visitors can view a 1788 first edition copy of *The Federalist* (National Constitution Center Collection), a work that remains one of Hamilton's greatest legacies.

To complement the exhibit experience, visitors can "meet" Alexander Hamilton and James Madison in the National Constitution Center's iconic *Signers' Hall*, and learn more about their roles in the Constitutional Convention.