

### Session Title

“What Did I Miss?”: Historians Discuss “Hamilton”

### Session Link [here](#)

### Session Participants

*Chairs:* Renee Romano, Oberlin College; David Greenberg

*Panelists:* Renee Romano, Oberlin College

Claire Potter, The New School

Patricia Herrera, University of Richmond

### Overview of the Session

America has gone Hamilton crazy. Lin-Manuel Miranda’s musical about Alexander Hamilton has resonated with the American public in ways unlike any other musical in American history. This panel brought together historians and cultural studies scholars to explore and help explain the Hamilton phenomenon. Panelists asked how Hamilton measures up as a work of history, what the popularity of the musical reveals about our contemporary moment, and whether a representation that is consciously ahistorical can still communicate historical truth. They also asked what, if anything, can historians learn from Hamilton about communicating the past in ways that engage the American public.

### NCHE Habits of Mind

- Read critically, to discern differences between evidence and assertion and to frame useful and appropriate questions about the past.
- Recognize that history is an evolving narrative constructed from available sources, cogent inferences, and changing interpretations.

### Key Points in Session

Beginning-1:01: Claire Potter acknowledges that the musical Hamilton isn’t entirely accurate, but it raises a lot of historical questions within larger themes of history and that teachers have the opportunity to build on the excitement that the musical has generated.

1:30-2:00: The first biography of Hamilton was written by his son, called a hagiography, and the panel of authors discusses how historians work with myths and how those myths evolve over time as well as how the musical addresses those myths incorporated with scholarly writing.

2:10-2:31: Discussion of Founder’s chic—a renewed importance of the Founding Fathers to American culture and how it speaks to the American condition at the end of the 20th century versus the beginning of the 19th century.

2:35-3:30: Potter talks about staging history in the form of a play, TV show, or movie versus writing a book about a topic. There are restraints put on a play compared to the depth historians can use to dig into history through writing a scholarly essay or book. One of the

authors discuss that there are only 10 characters in the Hamilton musical and that some of the moments in the musical are inaccurate due to the number of characters. It's important for teachers and students to understand how history is presented in different modes at different times.

3:40-4:48: A great teaching strategy, Potter discusses, is that teachers take out some money, pass it around and ask the students what they see and why these particular individuals are on our money and how these people are important to us today. Also, fans of the musical have kept Alexander Hamilton on the \$10 bill.

5:00-6:45: An important thing to be discussed in the session is that historical investigation can be done by any person. One of the authors writes about the Ron Chernow book and its criticism and how those faults made it into the musical. Historians can interrupt things incorrectly. It's critically important for students to do their own historical research and visit the evidence to judge for themselves whether an author has made a correct interpretation.

6:50-7:58: This section focuses on the social media fan community from Claire Potter's scholarly essay and how fans have been inspired by the musical to do historical research themselves from people reading the *Federalist Papers* to visiting Hamilton's home, the Grange. Fans are researching the evidence for themselves and reading primary sources about Hamilton. It is an exciting time for teachers to take advantage of students' quest to want to know more about Hamilton.

8:00-10:20: Potter finishes her interview by stating that the authors wish teachers would ask about historians' commitment to bringing history to a wider audience. Collaboration between high school and college teachers is important, and they are the front lines of historians because they teach the most students; since they work with students, they know what makes students excited about history. Teachers can reach out to the authors for how to bring exciting lessons to students. Hamilton is a way for teachers to connect to their students in order to bring about learning over new topics such as women's history. Potter and Romano would like to work more closely with high school and community college teachers to bring exciting lessons that interest students into schools.

### Potential Resources for Classroom Use

1. Videos, essays, and online exhibitions about Hamilton and the musical from [Gilder Lehrman](#), History Now.
2. The [papers of Alexander Hamilton](#).
3. Student friendly [biography](#) of Alexander Hamilton.
4. [Using Hamilton](#) in the classroom.
5. [Jefferson vs Hamilton](#) in rap form.

**Inquiry/Discussion Questions**

1. What aspects about Hamilton's life does the musical Hamilton get right? What aspects about the musical contradict Hamilton's life? Could Lin-Manuel Miranda have made the musical more historically accurate within the time constraints of a musical? Why or why not?
2. Should Lin-Manuel Miranda have used other sources besides Ron Chernow's book about Hamilton, incorporating other authors' perspectives into the show? How might the use of other sources have changed the production?
3. What are the most important primary sources to use in order to understand the life of Alexander Hamilton? Why did you select these sources? Where do you see those sources reflected in the musical?