

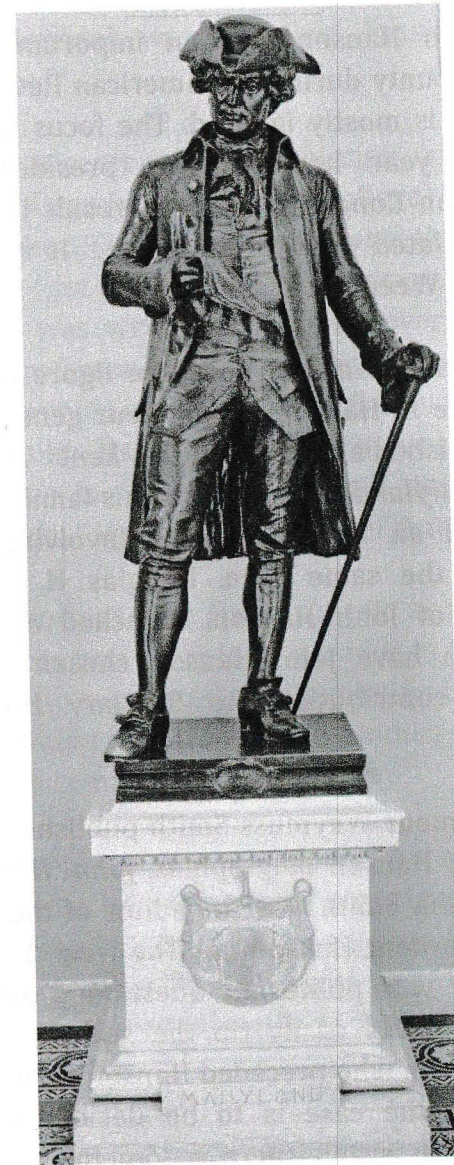
A Mythic Presidency:

JOHN HANSON

President of the U.S. in
Congress Assembled

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Many people have never heard of John Hanson, and if the name rings a bell at all it's because of traffic reports about Rt. 50, the John Hanson Highway. Few have any idea why he is memorialized. Primary source information about him is limited and hard to find. There are a handful of biographies, most of which cite no sources. There have been articles about him in publications ranging from the *New York Times* to the *National Inquirer*. Even John Stewart's *Daily Show* has weighed in on Hanson's legacy.



This statue of John Hanson by sculptor Richard E. Brooks was completed in 1903 and stands on the second floor of the Senate wing of the U.S. Capitol. *Photo courtesy of Architect of the Capital.*

Though John Hanson was an important figure in Frederick County during the American Revolution, his career here is mostly ignored. The focus tends to be the single year he spent as president of the Confederation Congress. The end result is the many myths associated with John Hanson. It would cause even Parson Weems to blush.

John Hanson was a fairly obscure figure until 1876, when George A. Hanson, an amateur genealogist and lawyer, published a book titled *Old Kent: The Eastern Shore of Maryland*. He connected his family with John Hanson and an impressive tale involving Swedish royalty. At the same time, Douglas H. Thomas, a descendant of John Hanson, launched a successful campaign to have John Hanson chosen as one of Maryland's contributions to Statuary Hall at the U.S. Capitol.

In 1932 Seymour Weymuss Smith published the most influential of Hanson biographies, *John Hanson: Our First President*. Smith was the editor of the *Financial Digest* and ardent Hansonite.¹ The *New York Times* book review was polite but questioned Mr. Smith's logic, which could easily tip the scales in favor of Thomas McKean who preceded Hanson as president of Congress: "If the case is to be decided on purely technical merits surely there is something to be said for him [McKean]!"² The *Richmond Times Dispatch* reviewer was more precise: "But Mr. Smith, the author of this biography, assuredly goes too far in claiming

that he [Hanson] was the first President of the United States."³

Maryland's Bicentennial Commission and Western Maryland College (now McDaniel College) collaborated to sponsor the 1976 publication of *John Hanson: Public Servant*, the first fully annotated work on Hanson. The monograph was written by Ralph Levering, then an assistant professor at the college. In an interview about the project Levering told the *Baltimore Sun*, "The picture of John Hanson as the first president of the United States is wrong, but he still deserves to be remembered...." He stressed his belief that,

More important than Hanson's role as president of Congress was his role as a leader in Frederick County who supported the Revolution by raising money, mustering troops and leading the local resistance committee.

Of the biographies up to that point he said, "They're not biographies by professional historians, they aren't based on research into primary sources. They are just based on each other."⁴ When contacted for this article, Prof. Levering stated he tends to agree with what he wrote in the 1970s.

At the bottom of the matter is a false equivalency and a misunderstanding of what the office of "President" meant in the 18th century. During that time it was nothing more than a presiding officer, a person

charged with maintaining order in a meeting. When the U.S. Constitution was being drafted, three weeks were spent in debate over what to call the leader of the executive branch. President was considered too lowly a title, but nothing else could be agreed upon. The title means what it does today because of the actions of the man who first held the office of chief executive, George Washington.

First President of the United States?

Before ratification of the Articles of Confederation, the Second Continental Congress acted as a government. It called itself the "Representatives of the United States, in General Congress, Assembled," when it issued the Declaration of Independence. It exercised important powers later enumerated in the Articles of Confederation: conducting war, making foreign alliances, directing the army and the navy, and making binding treaties.⁵ It did the job well enough to bring the states to the brink of victory.

The Articles of Confederation were drafted between the summer 1776 and 1777, and they reflected the desire for very limited central power. Many believed all that was needed was a "league of friendship" to deal with a limited number of common interests.⁶ Whatever power granted by the document was placed solely in the control of Congress. There was no executive,

judicial, or legislative branch, only a single body—Congress—to control all of these functions.

At their essence the Articles of Confederation were an expression of how the Continental Congress operated to that point. For example, Article IX states that a delegate could only be president for one of any three years in Congress. In 1779 Samuel Huntington planned to serve only a year, even though the Articles were not yet ratified. In 1780 he shared his anticipation of the end of his term in a letter: "The Period that confines me to my present painful Situation is almost expired..."⁷ Instead of allowing him to return to Connecticut, Congress voted to waive the term limit and Huntington remained in place.⁸

When ratification occurred on March 1, 1781 the Articles of Confederation were considered in effect. The celebration was recorded in the *Pennsylvania Packet* and the diary of Thomas Rodney: "In the evening there was a grand exhibition of fireworks at the State House & also on board Paul Jones frigate in the harbor..."⁹ Samuel Huntington continued as president, making him the first president of the Confederation Congress. In July he resigned; there was an election and the next man elected refused to serve. Another election was held and Thomas McKean chosen. McKean is the second president of the Confederation Congress and the first elected under the ratified Articles of Confederation.

On November 4, 1781, John Hanson became the third person to serve, the second person elected, and the first person to serve an entire year as president of Congress Assembled under the ratified Articles of Confederation. Nevertheless, the myth persists that claims Hanson as the nation's first president. In order for Hanson to be first president of the Confederation Congress, the date the Articles were to take effect would have to have been changed from March 1 to November 4. To delay important business makes no sense at all, with the war at a critical point and still very much in progress. Article V provides that the Congress will begin a new session on the first Monday of November of each year—it is not an effective date for the Articles.

The actions of the Congress itself clearly indicate a start date of March 1. Several examples suffice. Beginning in March, Congress began calling itself the United States in Congress Assembled and, until August, wrote the title at the top of almost every page of its journal.¹⁰ On March 1, Congress chartered a committee to update the rules (James Madison was on that committee).¹¹ Also in March, Congress addressed the starting point for service limits: March 1.¹² Contemporary sources make much of March 1 and little is said of November 4.

The one place expected to celebrate John Hanson's election as a major event does not. The *Maryland Gazette* devotes only a single sentence to the election,

stating nothing more than Hanson was elected president of Congress; it does not even mention he is from Maryland:

On Monday last, pursuant to the articles of confederation, a sufficient number of delegates for the states having met, the United States in Congress Assembled proceeded to the choice of a president for the ensuing year, and the ballots being taken the honourable JOHN HANSON was elected.¹³

The rest of the page reports celebrations following the victory at Yorktown.

The nature of the presidency under the Articles of Confederation was nothing like the presidency under the U.S. Constitution. When the Articles were drafted the last thing any of the states wanted was to vest any amount of power in a single individual, so they kept the position weak. The president had no power to set the agenda, or even the order in which issues could be dealt with.¹⁴ Historian Kenneth C. Davis put it this way: the president “wielded nothing more threatening than a gavel” and “couldn't even answer a letter without congressional approval.”¹⁵ The position was even weaker when constrained by a ratified Articles of Confederation.¹⁶ Although Congress operated by the Articles before ratification, there was some wiggle room because they were not in force. Once in force, they felt compelled to follow the Articles to the letter.

There is an oft-repeated and murky quote that Smith claims is supposed to denote the ranks of office.¹⁷ The actual quote refers not to a chain of command, but a point of protocol. These words can be found together in the *Journals of the Confederation Congress* only once, dated after the time Hanson served. It is a report of a committee "on the ceremonial of foreign Ministers," the order of precedence to be ceremonially observed during the visit of a foreign minister.¹⁸

It is also sometimes claimed that General George Washington reported to John Hanson as his Commander-in-Chief. However, a document witnessed by Hanson stated several times that Washington was Commander-in-Chief.¹⁹ No one but Washington held that title until he resigned from the army in December 1783. It also has been said that Washington presented the sword surrendered at Yorktown to Hanson. This is also untrue. Washington never even held the sword; he directed his second-in-command to receive it. The man held it briefly and returned it to the British.²⁰

When John Hanson died his obituary in the *Maryland Gazette* said only this about his career: "This gentleman had long been a servant to his country, in a variety of employments, the last of which was that of president of Congress."²¹ Interestingly, there are a few publications that have misstated this obituary. Jacob Nelson included an image of the *Maryland Gazette* obituary and a transcription in his 1939 book on Hanson. He followed it with his own commentary on

Hanson's life, which begins: "Thus ended the career of one of America's greatest statesman. While practically unknown to our people, and this is true to nearly all the generations that have lived since his day...."²² At some point someone substituted this for the *actual* obituary, citing the *Maryland Gazette* as the source and not Jacob Nelson. Since then it has been picked up by other publications. What makes this error so strange is that no one using the quote seems troubled by the words "all the generations that have lived since his day," even though John Hanson was dead only a few weeks before his obituary appeared in print.

When John Hanson's wife Jane died 30 years later, she was remembered only as the widow of a delegate to the "old Revolutionary Congress," not as first lady or the wife of a president.²³

It's Unanimous! (Well, Not Really)

So many misunderstandings seem to revolve around equating John Hanson with George Washington. If Washington was elected unanimously, then Hanson must have been, too. While we know the details of Washington's election, it is impossible to know the details of Hanson's election. The forms of the elections differed significantly. Under the U.S. Constitution, electors were chosen by each state, their only function to choose a President and Vice President. How they voted was recorded. Under the Articles of



Portrait of John Hanson, 1770 by John Hesselius.

Confederation, the delegates chose a presiding officer from among themselves and then continued on with regular business.

The November 4 entry in the *Journals of the Confederation Congress* records only that an election occurred and John Hanson was elected; the official record mentions nothing about a vote count. Representatives for two states, New York and Delaware, were not even present that day.²⁴

The November 4 entry does not say who, if anyone, ran against Hanson. It has been asserted that John Hanson was elected over such legendary historical figures as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and John Hancock. Actually, none of those mentioned were eligible to be president of Congress Assembled; according to Article IV, one had to be a member of Congress to be president and none of them were. In fact, Hanson only accepted on the condition that Maryland guarantee his return to Congress following state elections in a few weeks. If he had not been returned, he would not have been eligible to serve.²⁵

The Western Land Question

Without a doubt the path to power and wealth in the colonies was land ownership. Men in so-called “landless” colonies like Pennsylvania, Delaware,

New Jersey, and Maryland—colonies who had no western claims or had previously given them up—looked for a share of the western territories. They were determined to loose the grip of colonies with large land grants, like New York, Connecticut, and, especially, Virginia. To circumvent the authority of landed colonies, speculators formed land companies. These companies went directly to the British Crown for grants, but, failing there, they turned to the Indians to purchase land. When the colonies decided to declare independence, the companies looked to Congress to validate their claims. The companies trusted they had enough support among the delegates to gain success.

As early as 1775 Benjamin Franklin (a land company investor) had a plan of confederation, granting Congress the power to control the creation of new colonies in the territories.²⁶ The first draft of the Articles of Confederation gave Congress not only the power to create new governments in the territories, but also to set state boundaries and settle competing land claims.²⁷ However, the landed states successfully resisted this infringement on their rights and the provision was removed from the Articles.

Maryland withheld ratification on the grounds that landed colonies would be too powerful. In reality Maryland was in the “control of a tightly knit oligarchy of land speculators.”²⁸ Robert Brugger, author of *Maryland, A Middle Temperament* singles out Thomas Johnson, Samuel Chase, Charles Carroll of Carrollton,

and William Paca as primary forces blocking ratification.²⁹ All were investors in land companies.

The situation came to a head when the British Army, approaching from the south, threatened to turn the Chesapeake into a war zone. Maryland approached the French for protection and Anne-César de La Luzerne, the French envoy, hinted he would be in a better position to help once the Articles were ratified.³⁰ Confederation now was a priority. Virginia agreed to cede her land on the condition that the land company claims would be invalidated.

Thomas Johnson brought a bill to the Maryland Assembly authorizing the state’s delegates in Congress to ratify. The Senate rejected it, but the House pointed out that refusal was no longer in the best interests of the land question or Maryland. Authorization to sign was sent to John Hanson and Daniel Carroll, with the faint hope that the land claims still had chance of success in a confederated Congress.³¹

Some point to John Hanson as the individual who finally solved the impasse. However, there are just no primary sources to support the assertion. Hanson was a Maryland delegate at the time, but so was Daniel Carroll, and neither delegate could ratify without express instruction from Maryland. According to Ralph Levering, author of the most complete analysis of John Hanson’s career, there is no record of Hanson’s stand on the western land question, let alone documentation

that he was responsible for the solution.³² The two most important in-depth articles on the land question seem to confirm Levering, because they do not mention Hanson at all.³³

It is interesting to note that in front of the old Frederick County courthouse (now Frederick's City Hall) is a bust of Governor Thomas Johnson. The citation on the base gives him credit for solving the western land question.

Hanson & Washington: BFFs?

It is sometimes claimed that there was a close, personal relationship between George Washington and John Hanson. It has even been suggested that Hanson was a "mentor" to Washington, who was about a decade younger. In Washington's diaries there is a single reference to a "Mr. Hanson" visiting Mount Vernon in 1772. The editors of the most recent edition assert this is Samuel Hanson, not John Hanson: "Mr. Hanson is probably young Samuel Hanson or his brother Thomas Hawkins Hanson, sons of Samuel Hanson of Green Hill, Charles County, Md."³⁴ The members of Samuel Hanson's immediate family are mentioned several times in the diaries by name.

According to Mary V. Thompson, Research Historian at Mount Vernon, there is no evidence of a relationship

between George Washington and John Hanson before 1781. She states:

I've checked George Washington's diaries, to see if there are any references to either of the men visiting at the home of the other and found no references to John Hanson, anywhere in the diaries. The earliest correspondence I've found between the two dates to late in the year 1781, after Hanson became President of the Congress or, as it is described in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, "President of the Congress of the Confederacy," a very different thing from being President of the United States.³⁵

John Hanson's son, Alexander Contee Hanson, was, for a brief time (June 1776 to no later than December), on George Washington's staff. This is sometimes used to indicate a relationship between John Hanson and George Washington. It may seem reasonable at first glance, but further examination shows this is not the case. The orders for his appointment misstated his last name as Harrison. The probable reason for this is he gained the appointment due to the influence of his cousin, Robert Hanson Harrison.³⁶ Hanson was to be the assistant to Harrison, who had been one of Washington's lawyers.

Alexander Contee Hanson has been called an "aide de camp" or "private secretary" with the rank of Colonel; however, as stated in the orders, the position was

assistant secretary without military rank. After only a few months he was gone, citing ill health.³⁷ Without merit is the claim that his ill health was the result of exposure at the Battle of Brandywine; that battle took place in September 1777, nine months after he resigned. Starting in January 1777, he was a Clerk for the Maryland Senate. Washington later offered Hanson a Maryland District Court judgeship. Over time this offer grew in the telling into the offer of a position on the Supreme Court. In fact, it is worth noting that Hanson was Washington's third choice for the position, after Robert Hanson Harrison and Thomas Johnson declined. The incident is laid out in three letters between George Washington and James McHenry.³⁸

Thanksgiving Turkey

One of the accomplishments sometimes attributed to Hanson is the establishment of the first annual Thanksgiving celebration on the last Thursday of November. The Continental Congress issued a proclamation calling for a day of thanksgiving and prayer in every year starting in 1777. Most often they chose a day in December. In September 1781 a committee (which did not include John Hanson), chose December 13 as the date of the first thanksgiving following ratification. It was planned before Hanson took office.³⁹

Two thanksgiving proclamations were issued while Hanson was president of Congress. The first was issued in March 1782, calling for a day in April to be observed.⁴⁰ A copy of this proclamation, from the estate of a Hanson descendant, was sold at auction in 2011.⁴¹ In October a second proclamation was issued calling for a day in November. But the words "the last" (written before "Thursday") are struck out with a line and not included in the final proclamation.⁴² This was not an effort to establish a precedent for an annual day of thanksgiving to be held the last Thursday in November; in fact, the next year the observation was set to a date in December.

The annual holiday we celebrate today came about through the efforts of a New Englander, Sarah Josepha Hale. She lobbied the government for several years before President Abraham Lincoln made it an annual national holiday.

Happy Birthday Swedish Chief

The origins of the Hanson family and the year of John Hanson's birth are hotly debated. In the late 19th century George Hanson connected his family with John Hanson and Swedish royalty in his book, *Old Kent*. Harvey Wright Newman was the first to question the Swedish identity of John Hanson in his book *Charles County Gentry* (1939). After outlining George Hanson's story, he continues stating,

Regarding the truths of the above traditions, the compiler of these chronicles does not wish to enter any into any controversy, but the records which have been preserved in Maryland somehow seem to contradict the narrative.⁴³

George Ely Russell, the editor of the *National Genealogy Quarterly* and an internationally respected genealogist, took a look at George Hanson's claims in 1988 and flatly called them a "fallacy."⁴⁴ Since then it has been generally accepted that John Hanson is not Swedish or from the royal Vasa line. Russell's work was so compelling that a John Hanson memorial bust was removed from Gloria Dei (Old Swedes) Church in Philadelphia and references to John Hanson were removed from Swedish American museums. Kim-Eric Williams, Honorary Governor and Archivist of the Swedish Colonial Society, described the 1967 placement of the bust at Gloria Dei as a major "misstep." "The beautiful bust of Hanson, sculpted by Carl Lindborg, and its monolith have now been moved to his birthplace, Port Tobacco, Maryland, where he can still be seen but with no Swedish attribution."⁴⁵ Everything about John Hanson's family history points to English ancestry.⁴⁶

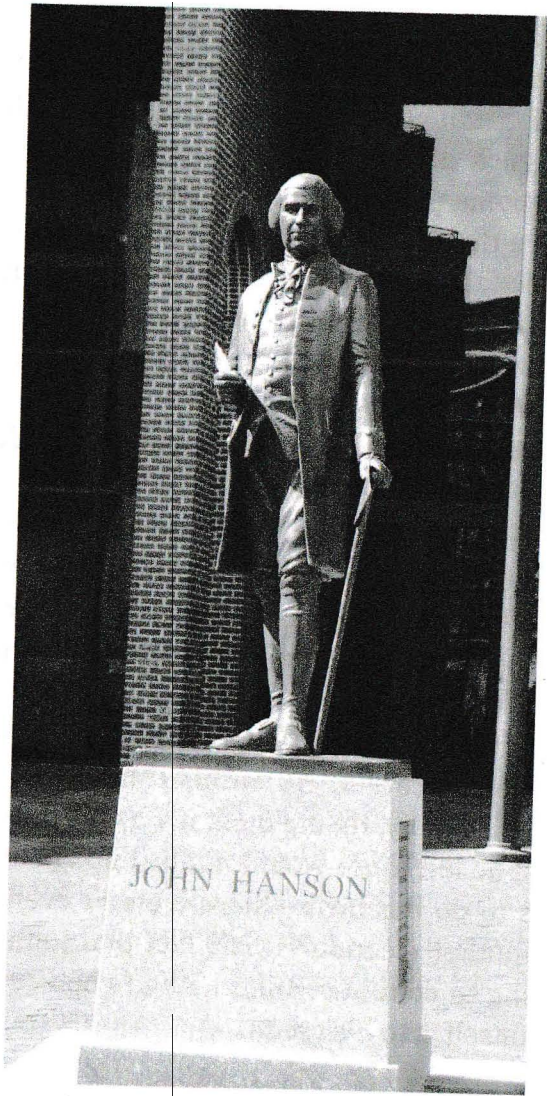
Some insist John Hanson was born in 1715, others in 1721. In 1982 the John Hanson Society officially stipulated they would use April 14, 1721 as Hanson's birth date. They based their position on the research of Rev. Alan Freed, who was archivist for the society.⁴⁷ As

his proof he cited the entries made in the Charles County Land Records by John Hanson's father, Samuel. Samuel Hanson was the county clerk and dutifully recorded each of his children in order of birth. The confusion comes with the entries for the children after John where the year is not clear, but the birth order is still correct. The date agrees with the information provided in an obituary in the *Maryland Gazette*.⁴⁸

Will the Real John Hanson, Please Stand Up?

John Hanson should be remembered for his contributions to Maryland's Revolutionary War efforts, which took place primarily in Frederick County. The effort to turn him into something he is not does Hanson, and our community history, a great disservice. His service in Congress was a postscript to his noteworthy career. He outlined his misgivings in letters to his family, telling them it was his duty to stay because if he left there would not be enough attending delegates to do business—there weren't even enough to hold another election.⁴⁹ The fact that John Hanson was willing to continue when he had good reasons to excuse himself is to his credit.

Deborah Brower is a Master Docent who volunteers at the HSFC's museums. She has a broad range of interest in 18th and 19th century social history and currently is researching the history of county slavery.



This memorial to John Hanson sits in front of the Frederick County Courthouse on Patrick Street, near the site where Hanson's Frederick home once stood. The statue was funded through donations received by the John Hanson Memorial Association and a Maryland bond bill and was dedicated in 2012.

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