

## John Hanson: Indispensable National Founder

By Peter Michael

This is the first of six articles on John Hanson leading up to the dedication of the John Hanson National Memorial in Frederick, Maryland, in 2012. The article appeared in the *Frederick News-Post* on October 23, 2011.



When they laid him to rest, he was sorely mourned by Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Franklin, Hancock and other American icons of his day, and the entire new breed he had helped bring into being, his countrymen now known the world over as Americans. Only the previous year he had been their president and he was their first former president to die.

Not long before, his fledgling nation teetered on history's edge, its precariousness no match for its soaring ideals. Its starving army fought the mightiest on Earth. Revolutionary patriots were hunted and executed. War funding was voluntary, sporadic and sparse. The United States were still plural, remaining sovereign states in nearly every respect, united in name only. The Second Continental Congress was weak, impoverished, poorly attended and no substitute for a government. Ratification of the Articles of Confederation to form the first government was held off in state after state for parochial interests, stalling nationhood in its tracks. No, in the years leading to his presidency, the grand American experiment faced the plausible prospects of brief sickly life and collapse.

Even today, what followed seems miraculous. Not only were certain states persuaded to subordinate their advantages for the sake of nationhood but, following the Declaration of Independence, the nation's first government was put forth in yet another ringing American document, the Articles of Confederation. But as the era played out, these crucial steps could happen only if fortune produced a transformational figure possessing the personal power to gather up and articulate the aspirations of his countrymen into a vision which would rise above dispute and to which all would subscribe.

Such a man, if he existed, would be the new nation's best, perhaps only, chance to bring forth its first breath. The esteemed Washington, leader of the heroic rag-tag army, eventually to claim the mantle of father of his country, did not step forward. The brilliant Jefferson, he of the incandescent prose of the nation's founding declaration, demurred. The polymath Franklin, perhaps brightest of them all, chose sage mentorship. Not Adams, nor Hancock, nor Hamilton, nor any other but one did the Founders summon to take on the challenge.

In 1781, a most timely providence called forth an American who by personal example gave his countrymen a heroic vision of what their nation might become, who gathered the blazing light of their aspirations into his prism and directed it to his and his country's ends, who imprinted his will and vision on his people and had them cherish it, who possessed the personal power to bring his country to life after its bloody birth, without diluting its visionary ideals.

As would no other American president, the new American leader would have to fashion a government from whole cloth, his country's first. This man, if he existed, would need such compelling character as could kindle from the embers of his countrymen's hopes the fire of a people transformed, a beacon of liberty and reason new to the world, charging them with his vision and beckoning others to its promise.

From Maryland, there was such a man and in 1781 the stage was his. He had attained colony-wide political power in Frederick, a rolling frontier where a raw electorate resonated with his ideas of nationhood. He had become a key Revolutionary War financier, militia raiser and arms agent. When Maryland alone demurred on declaring independence with the other colonies,

he, with sheer persuasive force and at the last hour, had moved Maryland into making the union whole. He had lost two sons to the war. He, when all others had failed, persuaded states with large trans-Appalachian land grants to cede them to the new nation assuring political parity among the states. Only this nation-saving plan that bore his name permitted the thirteen independent nation-states then to unite.

In the months after ratification of the Articles of Confederation chartering the first government, there was intense assessment of candidates to become the nation's first president that fall. On November 5, 1781, the new government's delegates, including the American icons mentioned, best of the best the nation had to offer, knew at that golden hour that they must choose the very best among them to head the government, he least likely to fail. In the all-important convening in Independence Hall that morning, when the last star finally aligned for the actual birth of the United States, all eyes fell on Frederick's John Hanson who was elected unanimously.

When they laid him to rest in 1783 and the nation he had done so much to usher onto the world stage grieved the loss of its first president, little could his countrymen anticipate that even his burial place would become unknown, the astounding climax to a tragic historical obliteration of an indispensable and sterling American performance.

This series tells the story of the most forgotten major figure in American history.