

## Greener Political Pastures: Hanson in Frederick

By Peter Michael

This is the second in a series of six articles on John Hanson leading up to the John Hanson National Memorial's dedication in Frederick, Maryland, in 2012. This article was published in the *Frederick News-Post* on November 27, 2011



By 1723 the Maryland Proprietor had begun selling large tracts of the future Frederick County where by the 1740s the swell of population required surer administration leading to incorporation of Fredericktowne in 1745 and chartering of Frederick County in 1748.

By 1755 Frederick County was Maryland's most populous and in the decade before the Revolutionary War grew by 117 percent, a rate not remotely approached by any other Maryland county. This growth shifted the balance of population from the Chesapeake's shores toward western Maryland causing realignment in the provincial House of Delegates.

Another shift was also taking place. From the first European settlement in 1631, the colony's power center had been heavily centered among the large old tobacco plantations lined up along the Chesapeake but now the burgeoning Frederick County was rapidly becoming Maryland's land of political opportunity.

By 1769 the county existed in stark contrast to the rest of Maryland: huge versus the much smaller older counties, rapidly growing versus nearly stable, new outlook versus old, experimental versus settled traditions, anti- versus pro-slavery, affordable versus expensive, multiethnic versus essentially monocultural, and fertile versus depleted soils from tobacco cultivation elsewhere. The vast western third of the colony comprising Frederick County offered greatest financial and social opportunity not only for the settler but for established gentry looking for new prospects.

Son of a judge, grandson of an immigrant, John Hanson grew up very comfortably in southern Maryland amidst the ruling patrician plantation class enjoying the privileges accruing to well-positioned British loyalists. But deep into comfortable mid-life, Hanson's aspirations for colonial independence quickened and in the 1760s he began pressing his views on his riverine neighbor George Washington and others. In Mount Vernon's visitor records, Hanson appears often.

Hanson felt increasingly distanced from many of his own class, relatives and friends because of widening divergence between his and their views on independence. After Frederick County became first to officially oppose Britain's onerous 1765 Stamp Act, Hanson visited to test the waters and liked what he saw.

In fall 1769 Hanson gained the Proprietor's appointment as the county's Deputy Surveyor, a seemingly inadequate position for the senior statesman but actually one of Maryland's best compensated, most prized offices. The appointment afforded Hanson an excellent political toehold, acquainted him with the sprawling county's power brokers, and allowed him rapid, well informed property investments.

Most crucially, Hanson understood that to maximize his political effectiveness he needed to occupy an executive as opposed to legislative role. That left it to him to identify the executive position in the colony which offered highest personal power and best vantage from which to exercise his political will and aspirations for American independence. Easily the most fertile political territory for Hanson was the colony's huge independent-minded western reach, Frederick County which had been organized barely two decades before.

Previous biographers have labored to explain why Hanson uprooted himself from contented life at Mulberry Grove and relocated to what was then a roiling frontier. Oral tradition and other evidence make his reason clear: after Frederick County's official defiance of the Stamp Act displayed the county's temperament, John Hanson moved to Frederick for the clear-cut prospect of greener political pastures.

In exchanging his non-executive position as Charles County legislator for his chief executive position running the colony's largest, most populous, fastest growing, most rebellious county, John Hanson vastly increased his political base, vaulting him from just another strident powerless voice against less British oppression to a force to be reckoned with colony-wide.

In the fall of 1769 at age 54, late in life for his era, John Hanson gave up his easy plantation life at Mulberry Grove with its grand long views overlooking the Potomac and Port Tobacco rivers and moved his family to Frederick as ferment rose in the colonies and the Revolutionary War beckoned. Hanson would make his home in Frederick for 14 years until his death, his wife Jane for 33 until hers.

Hanson's political motivation in moving paid off entirely as Frederick County elected him to every office he sought from 1774 to the end of his life. The county, mostly still rough-hewn frontiersmen and new European immigrants, resonated with Hanson's political vision and quickly elected the newcomer to the county's highest executive position and simultaneously to the colonial then state legislature in Annapolis.

From Frederick, Hanson raised the earliest Revolutionary War militias, became a key war financier, pressed the proposal for nationhood adopted by the Maryland Assembly and was launched into national politics.

Now an openly proclaimed rebel with a price on his head, Hanson's lucrative British appointments were replaced by his uncompensated position of breakaway county Chairman. From establishmentarian to outlaw, well-compensated to unpaid, secure to threatened with the noose, John Hanson had now put life, family and fortune at stake for his new nation's self-determination.