

The Unifier: Hanson Twice Keeps the Nation Whole

By Peter Michael

This is the third 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 December 25, 2011.



As the Second Continental Congress debated independence in Philadelphia in late June 1776, Maryland remained saddled with doubts causing widespread concern that nationhood might not be unanimous. The clock winding down, an annoyed John Adams wrote Maryland's Samuel Chase, "Maryland now stands alone. I presume she will soon join company; if not, she must be left alone." Exasperated, the Congress began considering a checkerboard union with drastically lessened national prospects, but pro-unification delegates held fast for unanimity.

With a rising tide elsewhere urging unity, John Hanson again took the lead in Maryland as he had in raising militias and war materiel. Persuading the Freeman of Frederick, Hanson on June 21 presented their resolution favoring independence to the Maryland Convention, forcefully weighing in with its delegates to reverse Maryland's 1775 position opposing independence, a feat until then thought impossible.

Hanson and the politically rambunctious Frederick County had taken the lead in bringing Maryland in. A strident early mover for independence, his gaining Maryland's consent now made him heard beyond his colony's borders. While others had influenced their assemblies on independence, they hadn't had to fashion an eleventh-hour pivot of national destiny as Hanson had.

Hanson's remonstrance concluded with lasting words: "These resolutions ought to be passed and it is high time," which his biographers have reckoned as the Convention's turning point. In his return letter, Delegate Samuel Chase urged Adams, "be assured that Frederick speaks the sense of many counties," and on June 28 the Convention ratified Hanson's proposal.

The same day, Thomas Jefferson presented his Declaration of Independence draft to the Congress which could only hope that positive word would yet arrive from Maryland. By July 1 Congress president John Hancock, still lacking unanimity, adjourned the body giving the delegates the evening for deliberation. By morning, all colonies were in but Maryland and the Congress was prepared to declare independence without her. Reaching Congress late that day, Maryland's consent made adoption unanimous.

Still indispensable in his war roles in materiel, funding and militia raising, John Hanson wouldn't make his appearance at the Congress for another four years. When he did, he put forth yet another Hanson Plan which would again hold the hopeful union together. His two nation-saving strokes would make him his country's first president.

What the Congress accepted on July 2 was independence itself and on July 4 several wording changes. State ratifications were gathered through August 2 when the nation actually came into being in name and spirit though without a government for another five years when the United States could finally realize nationhood.

Back in Frederick, Hanson must have taken special contentment that ratification had been unanimous, Maryland was not odd-man-out, and he as much as any had ensured national wholeness.

Even before the Declaration of Independence was ratified, the Congress began work on chartering a government to complete nationhood. In November 1777, the Congress adopted the

nation's original constitution, the Articles of Confederation, sending it to the states for ratification, but Maryland had put forth its ultimatum that states with western lands must cede them to the forthcoming central government for its sole disposition into new states.

And there the Articles stalled for the next three years. Having put Congress on notice that Maryland would not ratify unless the western lands conundrum were resolved, by 1780 the Articles lacked only Maryland's agreement.

In colonial times, British kings had granted seven colonies large trans-Appalachian land grants, in three cases extending to the Pacific Ocean. The six hemmed-in states without western territories feared future population growth of the seven and their eventual overpowering national electoral advantage. Hanson saw the western lands rift for the unsustainable peril that it was, a fatal disparity that with time could only fester into worse division.

Only Maryland's assent was needed to complete confederation, the lone holdout now roundly criticized and the western lands a full-blown nation-breaking standoff.

Seeing the prospect of unity slipping away in late 1779, John Hanson, in the bridge-building manner noted by all of his biographers, urged the Maryland General Assembly to change course from correct but cold principle to reasoned persuasion. Taking Hanson's lead, the Assembly adopted the Declaration of Maryland and appointed Hanson as Delegate to the Second Continental Congress. Not long after his 1780 arrival, the Congress began referring colloquially to Maryland's new approach as the Hanson Plan.

Within eight months, a despairing George Washington saw his old ally Hanson sever the Gordian Knot, wheel twelve opposing states around, charter a government unanimously and launch it. On March 1, 1781, Hanson famously added his signature, the last, to the Articles of Confederation finally chartering the original government to be consummated that November with his election as its first president.

Twice at critical junctures John Hanson had kept his nation whole. One longs for such a unifier in Washington today.