

Best of the Best: The Icons of His Era Elect Hanson President

By Peter Michael

This is the fourth 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 January 22, 2012.



By 1781, the United States had evolved through each step but one to establish nationhood. In 1776 the colonies had declared independence, in 1777 the Articles of Confederation were drafted prescribing a government, by 1781 the Hanson Plan had assured unified nationhood by resolving the western lands impasse, and that March the states had ratified the Articles authorizing a government. All that remained for full nationhood letting the United States take her place on the world stage was to launch the original government that November, the timing prescribed by the Articles.

To whom among them should the Second Continental Congress delegates look as most likely to successfully deliver the new government fulfilling nationhood at this most critical juncture? While the eight other presidents of the first government and all forty-four under the later Constitution inherited a functioning government upon taking office, the nation's first president would inherit but a blank slate and have to create anew the entire government structure, trappings and performance.

For their first president, the delegates had a dazzling choice of some of the most competent Americans the nation ever saw: the heroic Washington who had just delivered military victory, the intellectually dazzling Jefferson who had penned a nation-founding canon such as the world had never seen, John Hancock who had presided longest over the outgoing Congress, the brilliant John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin, mentor to them all, to name but a few.

Leading up to launching the government, critical assessments of these men and others frothed as delegates deliberated the pivotal choice of their nation's first president. On November 5, 1781, the delegates including the American icons mentioned — the best the new nation had to offer — understood at that golden hour that they must choose the very best among them. In that all-important convening in Independence Hall, as the last star finally aligned for completion of national birth, all eyes fell on Maryland's John Hanson, best of the best in the minds of some of the most astute Americans who ever lived.

Ever so fortunately, fate has favored the nation with her best presidents at the most perilous junctures: Washington at the founding of the second government, Lincoln as the nation cleaved apart, the second Roosevelt as the nation's very wellbeing crumpled. It isn't difficult to make the case that the first time providence delivered an especially able president was when the nation was a newborn facing the imperative of electing a first president who dare not miss.

What was it that stirred the delegates to look to Hanson as their very best over many who have since entered the pantheon of American greats?

What the Second Continental Congress delegates saw before his arrival in 1780 were Hanson's having convinced Maryland to subscribe to the Declaration of Independence, four years later his advancing Maryland's Hanson Plan to solve the western lands impasse, and his already having sacrificed a son and much family wealth to independence.

After his arrival at the Congress, Hanson's leadership became visible first-hand, especially his solving the nation-breaking western lands riddle. As the delegates had seen peering into this abyss,

united nationhood hung in the balance as Hanson, where no other had succeeded, bridged the gap within eight months between states with and without large trans-Appalachian land grants. And as they knew, weeks before his election Hanson had lost another son to the war and his eldest daughter.

The delegates also witnessed the astuteness with which Hanson, using his hallmark diplomacy, marshaled his Second Continental Congress colleagues' support, convincing states with sharply disparate interests to subordinate themselves for the sake of national unity. Hanson's biographers uniformly describe him as a modest man possessed of natural ability at working constructively with others, organizational brilliance, leadership acumen and an unerring devotion to national unity. On the two hundredth anniversary of Hanson's inauguration as president, Frederick's United States Senator Charles Mathias would say in a Frederick ceremony, "John Hanson, confronted with problems common to his day and ours, handled those problems in a manner uncommon to his day and ours. Such is the stuff of leadership. Events pass; people pass. Leadership endures."

Embracing him as Hanson the Unifier, the delegates took his temperament, constructive instincts, record and devotion as timely providence.

And so, on November 5, 1781, as its first action, the new government, including some of the greatest Americans ever to serve, unanimously elected John Hanson their nation's first president, the highest position in the land, as nationhood was thus begun and the Second Continental Congress passed into history. John Hanson became the first American recognized at home or abroad as head of state of the United States. His title was President of the United States in Congress Assembled, the same worn by his eight successors. As we shall see, he grandly succeeded.