

Onto the World Stage: The Hanson Administration

By Peter H. Michael

This is the fifth 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 February 6, 2012.



On November 5, 1781, upon John Hanson's election as president, the sweeping concept of the United States of America ended its pregnancy, finally became whole with a government, vaulted from grand theory to life, and took its celebrated place in history.

As its second order of business that day, the new government legislated that, "The President takes precedent of all and every person in the United States; next to him, members of Congress have precedence; then the Commander-in-Chief of the Army; then the great officers of Congress."

While all other presidents of the first government and those under the Constitution inherited a functioning government, Hanson and his cabinet had to fashion one anew from whole cloth.

Cabinet positions were created in the order of Foreign Affairs, Finance and War, today's Secretaries of State, Treasury and Defense, the hierarchy followed in modern protocol and presidential succession.

Weeks into Hanson's administration, the nation's first central bank, the Bank of North America, predecessor to today's Federal Reserve, began operation near Independence Hall.

Hanson's appointments of Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, John Jay and Henry Laurens as the American team sent to Paris to negotiate peace with Britain were singularly instrumental in what has been reckoned "the greatest victory in the annals of American diplomacy," a negotiating triumph doubling the area of the United States. With Hanson's sure-handed guidance and dazzling appointments, brilliant is not too strong a term describing his administration's foreign affairs performance. Few administrations since can claim diplomatic advances matching those of Hanson's presidency, all not in a four-year span of modern administrations but in a single year.

John Hanson's administration also launched a number of lasting national customs.

First of these was that Americans had in Jane Contee Hanson their first First Lady, the title originated in the United States and now used widely elsewhere. Into the mid-nineteenth century, the title had not come into usage, Martha Washington, for example, referred to as Lady Washington. Nevertheless, the nation has always had at the side of its president a woman serving as the nation's hostess and acknowledged as such in her own time. Titled or not, capitalized or not, all of these women from Jane Hanson through Michelle Obama served their nation as First Ladies.

An executive mansion and presidential portraits were established during the Hanson administration. Days following Hanson's inauguration, Congress provided a nearby mansion, household staff, coach, horses and household expenses to the Hanson family. During 1782, the president sat for his Charles Willson Peale portrait, now in the Independence Hall collection.

Two other enduring customs from the nation's first presidential administration are official annual observances of the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving established by Hanson presidential decrees.

One must wonder how history would have reckoned the presidents of the original government and the early presidents of the second had they switched places. Was it sheer charisma, weight of accomplishment or executive brilliance which has emblazoned Washington, Adams, Jeffer-

son and Madison in their nation's memory, or were they more able to make their marks by serving four or eight years with far greater authority under a strengthened government charter, the Constitution? Excepting Adams who served a single term, these presidents each served a year longer than did all nine first-government presidents together. If these four had served as the first presidents of the original weaker government, each with a single twelve-month term, would they still have been able to attain their lasting recognition or would they, too, have been relegated to the back shelves of history as those who first served have been?

Conversely, what records would the first government's presidents have compiled if instead they had served under the Constitution's greater presidential authority and had four or eight times longer in office to make their marks? They would have been able to accomplish far more, been recorded far more fondly by history, and show up in any list of presidents since. Americans would know the nine by name. If Washington and Hanson had served in opposite governments, which of them would be better known today? These contrasts make clear why the second government's early presidents wear the deserved mantle of Founding Fathers but their presidential predecessors remain uncounted.

I queried twenty historians to divine the inattention to the indispensable national evolution of the 1780s, but these astute correspondents could find no particular reason for the neglect, or as one put it, "the glaring gap in historians' treatment of the 1780s." None could report any major book explicitly and comprehensively devoted to the decade.

What one concludes on the historical hollow of the 1780s is that explanations offered are only symptoms of the root neglect which is sheer neglect itself. It is high time for a definitive political history of what John Quincy Adams correctly discerned as the critical decade of the United States.