

Vanished: Discovering Hanson's Grave and Reilluminating Him Today

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This is the last 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 March 25, 2012.



Robbed tomb and mass grave: no story of an American First Couple approaches John and Jane Hanson's except perhaps the Lincolns' assassination and asylum.

When John Hanson returned home to Frederick after his presidency, he longingly re-engaged his roles of family man, merchant, planter and now past president but had a difficult winter going into 1783. Expectations put on former presidents take time and vigor, calling on the first past president to spend considerable energy answering correspondence, receiving visitors and advising on matters of state. Hanson rallied enough that summer to receive accolades in Annapolis but by fall slipped into a last decline.

While visiting Oxon Hill Manor, his nephew's Prince George's County estate, President Hanson took ill a final time, lingering with much discomfort. On November 22, 1783, the American who had twice been indispensable in assuring nationhood, to whom the young nation had turned to first lead it, who had sacrificed much in bringing forth his country, died at 68. Had he lived five days more, he would have celebrated Thanksgiving which by his quill had become official one year earlier.

Then John Hanson vanished.

In one of the most astounding turns in American history, Hanson's gravesite became forgotten, rediscovered, forgotten again, and found once more in 2011 in researching *Remembering John Hanson* by which time it and Hanson's body had vanished in a most tragic manner.

In 1984, Oxon Hill Manor was purchased for development by Lewis Enterprises which in 1986 commissioned surveys that included the crypt where John Hanson had been interred. A 1985 State survey had found the crypt and its vault intact and sealed, but by 1987 the archeologist of the Lewis survey states, "About 70 to 80 feet below the site of the plantation house was a deteriorating brick vaulted structure built into the hillside" which the archeologist wrote "was the 1783 burial place of John Hanson" and "*had been robbed.*"

Sometime between 1985 and 1987, John Hanson had disappeared.

Then, so did the crypt and vault. A 1993 photograph shows them having mysteriously vanished, graded into a parking lot. From 1984 to 1993, Lewis Enterprises owned the property. Later, Lewis's development project ran out of money and the property was sold to the Peterson Companies, developer of the immense National Harbor. Efforts to track down James Lewis, head of Lewis Enterprises, have proved futile.

Compounding the astonishing historical misfortunes obscuring John Hanson's legacy, Jane Hanson would also vanish after death.

In 1913, 356 individuals were reinterred from Frederick's old Episcopal graveyard to nearby Mount Olivet Cemetery when the church sold the graveyard for development. Mount Olivet's well-kept records indicate that how a body from the Episcopal graveyard was reinterred depended on whether it had a legible gravestone from the old cemetery. The 70 with legible gravestones were reburied individually, identified by their gravestones. Those without legible

gravestones and others including Jane Hanson who had been buried in family crypts with unmarked coffins were reinterred together in a mass grave. These 286 unidentified souls rest in one large burial vault beneath an unmarked grassy knoll at Mount Olivet.

In 2009, a movement arose to revive national awareness of John Hanson, his indispensable roles in the Revolution, and the accomplishments of his presidency. Initiatives include *Remembering John Hanson*, and John Hanson Memorial Association programs including the John Hanson National Memorial, correction of Internet inaccuracies on Hanson, and a permanent public education campaign reacquainting Americans with their first president.

If any place should rekindle the memory of John Hanson, it would be Frederick to which Hanson moved late in life and refashioned his life for the sake of nationhood. Adopting one another, Hanson and Frederick forged a political bond that propelled both to the historical forefront of the nation's founding.

Chosen for the Memorial site was the Frederick County Courthouse courtyard adjacent to the site of John Hanson House, tragically razed in 1981. In 2011, the Memorial was donated by the John Hanson Memorial Association to Frederick County and serves as the place where Americans may finally honor their first president. A memorial for Jane at her grave is in the works.

An observation by his son, Maryland Chancellor Alexander Contee Hanson, is John Hanson's fitting epitaph. As Alexander wrote in *The Laws of Maryland* and later delivered as a toast honoring his father,

"During the whole memorable interval between the fall of the old and the institution of the new form of government, there appeared to exist amongst us such a fund of public virtue as has scarcely a parallel in the annals of the world."

Public virtue indeed.

The historical record is clear: John Hanson was chosen to first lead the country as it consummated nationhood, rests in the very top rank of deliverers of the United States, and did as much as any giving birth to a nation which ever since has been emulated the world over for its ideals of independence and democracy.

May his nation's memory of him be now forever reawakened.