

The Life and Story of a True American Patriot and Founding Father: John Hancock

By: Michael Adams¹

John Hancock was born January 23rd, 1737, in Braintree (now Quincy) Massachusetts.² When he was still young, Hancock's father had died and he went to live with his aunt and uncle in Boston who ran a very successful import and export business, making them one of the wealthiest families in Boston.³ As Hancock started to grow up, he took an interest in his uncle's business and attended Harvard University.⁴ Eventually, he moved to England for a year in hopes to secure more relationships with customers for his uncle's business.⁵ Hancock returned from England to take over the business when his uncle's health started to fail. He would be criticized for spending his newfound wealth lavishly.⁶

At the close of the French and Indian War, the British debt was severe.⁷ To counteract this, Parliament enacted the Stamp Act in hopes of raising revenues.⁸ At first, Hancock was not a political activist and considered himself a loyal British subject.⁹ He was soon elected to be one of five Selectmen for Boston,¹⁰ and thereafter, elected to the Massachusetts House of Representatives.¹¹ This is where he met and became the protege of Samuel Adams.¹² When the Townshend Act was passed, this seemed to be the final straw and Hancock fully opposed the measure, so much so that two British Customs officials thought he was a smuggler. The customs officials boarded Hancock's brigg,¹³ Lydia. When Hancock found out, he had his crew expel the officials off the boat for not having a proper search warrant.¹⁴ The citizens of Boston hailed him as a hero and his Patriot persona blossomed.¹⁵

In 1768, British Customs officials again would enter one of Hancock's ships in an event that would become known as the Liberty Affair.¹⁶ Custom officials thought that Hancock had his crew unload a shipment of wine in the middle of the night to avoid the taxes from the Townshend Act.¹⁷ Two officials on board the boat testified that no one was on board

on the night in question and that no wine had been removed, but a month later changed their stories and the ship was confiscated by the Royal Navy and renamed HMS Liberty.¹⁸ One year into the future, while on patrol off the coast of Rhode Island, the ship was put to the torch by a group of angry colonists in retaliation for the British confiscating the ship.¹⁹

After the events of the Liberty Affair, the British response was to suppress unrest with military power.²⁰ Hancock led a select committee to ask for the removal of British troops from Boston.²¹ The troops remained however and the tensions between the solid and the people of Boston grew more strained which ultimately led to the events of the Boston Massacre.²² Hancock exclaimed after the events, in a speech, that "I glory in publicly avowing my eternal enmity to tyranny."²³ Soon thereafter Hancock met with the new Governor of Massachusetts, Thomas Hutchinson, and demanded that the troops, again, be withdrawn from Boston.²⁴ Hutchinson, wanting a reduction of violence, obliged and removed the troops to a near off coast island.²⁵ In 1770, when Parliament repealed parts of the Townshend Act, the boycott of British goods ceased, but tensions still remained.²⁶

Ultimately, Hancock was sent from Benjamin Franklin. The letter was from Hutchinson and was intercepted before it arrived in London. It stated that in order to maintain order in Boston and Massachusetts, Parliament should consider stripping the colonists of basic English liberties.²⁷ This was the final straw for Hancock and when the Tea Act was passed, all Hancock said was "Let every man do what is right in his own eyes."²⁸ That very same night, the Boston Tea party occurred. Hancock did not participate directly but approved of the demonstration.²⁹

After the Boston Tea Party, the Provincial Congress elected Hancock to the Second Continental Congress, which unanimously elected him President of the Congress. This action put a target on Hancock's head by British officials who wanted to arrest him.³⁰ While Hancock stayed in his childhood home in Lexington with Samuel Adams to wait for it to be safe to travel to Philadelphia to attend the Congress, General and later

Governor, Thomas Gage sent a group of soldiers to seize Patriot arms and ammunition from a store in Concord.³¹ Patriot Joseph Warren, believing that Gage had also given instructions to arrest Hancock and Samuel Adams, sent Paul Revere on his famous “midnight ride” to warn both Hancock and Adams that the British were moving in to arrest them.³² The two made their escape and Gage issued a proclamation stating that anyone who would peacefully lay down their arms would be pardoned-- except for John Hancock and Samuel Adams.³³ As President of the Congress, Hancock had presided over the toughest parts of the American Revolution and the signing of the Declaration of Independence. He is known for his rather large signature.³⁴

In 1777, Hancock asked the Congress for a leave of absence to return to Boston and General Washington provided a military escort.³⁵ Hoping to be reelected to the Massachusetts House of Representatives, Hancock used his popularity of philanthropy to gain a seat. After being reelected, Hancock was again voted in as a delegate to the Continental Congress and rejoined them in Philadelphia in 1778. Hancock tried to retake his seat as President of Congress but was unable to do so. Before completing another brief tenure in the Congress, Hancock joined in signing the Articles of Confederation, he then left for a military appointment.³⁶ He commanded some 6,000 men in an attack on a British fort in New Port, Rhode Island.³⁷ The planned attack turned out to be a disaster and Hancock suffered a reputational blow.³⁸

Hancock returned to Massachusetts to preside over the ratification of the Massachusetts Constitution and was elected Governor for the first time and continued governing through the end of the Revolutionary War.³⁹ He decided to leave the office right before Shays Rebellion, but would return and continue being reelected to terms for the remainder of his life.⁴⁰ He was elected to the Confederation Congress after the Articles of Confederation were ratified, but was unable to attend due to unforeseen health issues.⁴¹ When the Annapolis Convention met to discuss the shortcomings of the Articles of Confederation and later the Philadelphia convention, Hancock was again unable to attend.⁴² He had been elected

as the president of the ratifying committee for Massachusetts but had misgivings about the new Constitution because of the lack of a Bill of Rights.⁴³

After the new Constitution was ratified in 1789, Hancock was placed as a fourth candidate on the ballot for President.⁴⁴ Only gaining a total of four electoral votes, Hancock spent the remainder of his life as Governor of Massachusetts and died in his bed in 1793 at the age of 56 years old.⁴⁵

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² John Hancock - HISTORY <https://www.history.com/topics/american-revolution/john-hancock#section_1> (accessed July 14, 2020).

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Signers of the Declaration of Independence - John Hancock <<https://www.ushistory.org/declaration/signers/hancock.html>> (accessed July 13, 2020).

⁶ John Hancock - HISTORY <https://www.history.com/topics/american-revolution/john-hancock#section_1> (accessed July 14, 2020).

⁷ The Stamp Act - HISTORY <https://www.history.com/topics/american-revolution/stamp-act#section_1> (accessed July 13th, 2020).

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ Signers of the Declaration of Independence - John Hancock <<https://www.ushistory.org/declaration/signers/hancock.html>> (accessed July 13, 2020).

¹⁰ Selectmen were the council responsible for the governing of Boston.

¹¹ John Hancock - HISTORY <https://www.history.com/topics/american-revolution/john-hancock#section_2> (accessed July 13, 2020).

¹² 1765-1767: Stamp Act and Townshend Act - John Hancock Heritage <<http://www.john-hancock-heritage.com/stamp-act-townshend-acts/>> (accessed July 13, 2020) Some historians believe that Samuel Adams became close to John Hancock to gain access to his enormous wealth to help the Patriot cause, but these claims are unsubstantiated.

¹³ A two-masted sailing vessel, square-rigged on both masts.

¹⁴ The Liberty Affair - John Hancock Heritage <<http://www.john-hancock-heritage.com/the-liberty-affair/>> (accessed July 13, 2020).

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ 1770-1773: Boston Massacre and Boston Tea Party - John Hancock Heritage <<http://www.john-hancock-heritage.com/boston-massacre-boston-tea-party/>> (accessed July 14, 2020).

²¹ *Id.*

²² The Life of John Hancock - Heritage <<http://www.john-hancock-heritage.com/biography-life/>> (accessed July 13, 2020).

²³ John Hancock: Founding Father Quote <<http://www.foundingfatherquotes.com/quote/760>> (accessed July 15th, 2020).

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.* Four years later, Hancock would deliver a lengthy speech commemorating the events of the Boston Massacre and his views would become more radical.

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ Thomas Hutchinson - HISTORY <<https://www.history.com/topics/american-revolution/thomas-hutchinson>> (accessed July 13, 2020). This would become what is called the “Hutchinson Letters.”

²⁸ The Turning Point in John Hancock’s Political Career - John Hancock Heritage <<http://www.john-hancock-heritage.com/political-career/>> (accessed July 13, 2020).

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ The Life of John Hancock - John Hancock Heritage <<http://www.john-hancock-heritage.com/biography-life/>> (accessed July 14th, 2020).

³¹ *Id.*

³² *Id.*

³³ Proclamation by General Thomas Gage, June 12, 1775 - Library of Congress <<https://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/amrev/shots/proclaim.html>> (accessed July 13, 2020).

³⁴ John Hancock - HISTORY <https://www.history.com/topics/american-revolution/john-hancock#section_4> (accessed July 14, 2020).

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ President of the Second Continental Congress - John Hancock Heritage <<http://www.john-hancock-heritage.com/president-of-continental-congress/>> (accessed July 14th, 2020).

³⁷ Biography of John Hancock - John Hancock Heritage <<http://www.john-hancock-heritage.com/biography-life/>> (accessed July 14th, 2020).

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ About John Hancock - John Hancock Heritage <<http://www.john-hancock-heritage.com/about-john-hancock/>> (accessed July 15th, 2020).

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ John Hancock- Encyclopedia Britannica <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Hancock>> (accessed July 14th, 2020).

⁴² John Hancock - HISTORY <https://www.history.com/topics/american-revolution/john-hancock#section_4> (accessed July 14, 2020).

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ John Hancock- Encyclopedia Britannica <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Hancock>> (accessed July 14th, 2020).

⁴⁵ John Hancock - HISTORY <https://www.history.com/topics/american-revolution/john-hancock#section_1> (accessed July 14, 2020).