

The John Hanson Story

John Hanson (1721-1783)

When we think of the President of the United States, many people do not realize that we are actually referring to presidents elected under the U.S. Constitution. Everybody knows that the first president in that sense was George Washington. But in fact the Articles of Confederation, the predecessor to the Constitution, also called for a president—albeit one with greatly diminished powers. Eight men were appointed to serve one-year terms as president under the Articles of Confederation. The first was John Hanson, in 1781. His exact title was the “President of the United States in Congress Assembled.”

The Articles of Confederation did not specifically “define” the powers of the President, and so under John Hanson’s leadership various departments of the government were formed. He alone had the authority to correspond and negotiate with foreign governments. During his one year in office, he approved the Great Seal of the United States that is still used today and helped establish the first U.S. Treasury Department. He led the flight to guarantee the statehood of the Western Territories beyond the Appalachian Mountains that had been controlled by some of the original thirteen colonies.

Upon his death on November 21, 1783, the following eulogy appeared in the *Maryland Gazette*:

“Thus was ended the career of one of America’s greatest statesmen. While hitherto practically unknown to our people, and this is true as to nearly all the generations that have lived since his day, his great handiwork, the nation which he helped to establish, remains as a fitting tribute to his memory. It is doubtful if there has ever lived on this side of the Atlantic, a nobler character or shrewder statesman. One would search in vain to find a more powerful personage, or a more aggressive leader, in the annals of American history. And it is extremely doubtful if there has ever lived in an age since the advent of civilization, a man with a keener grasp of, or a deeper insight into, such democratic ideals as are essential to the promotion of personal liberty and the extension of human happiness. He was firm in his opinion that the people of America were capable of ruling themselves without the aid of a king.”



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