

## Presidents Who Served

The Articles of Confederation was the first constitution of the United States of America and was in effect from 1781-1789. There were eight individuals appointed by Congress for a one-year term in office, and each was referred to as "President of the United States in Congress Assembled." When John Hanson of Maryland was appointed in 1781, he was the first to serve the one-year term in office as specified in Article IX of the Articles of Confederation:

*The United States in Congress assembled shall have authority... to appoint such other committees and civil officers as may be necessary for managing the general affairs of the United States under their direction—to appoint one of their members to preside, provided that no person be allowed to serve in the office of president more than one year in any term of three years;*

George Washington acknowledged the importance of the position in a letter stating that: "I congratulate your Excellency on your appointment to fill the most important seat in the United States."

If we had not had the Articles of Confederation to learn how to create a national government, there is a very good chance that we could not have had the present Constitution.

The following are short biographies of each of America's first presidents.

### **John Hanson (1715-1783)**

John Hanson was the first President of the United States in Congress Assembled and served from November 5, 1781 to November 4, 1782. He was born in Charles county, Maryland, in 1715 and died in Oxen Hills, Prince George County, Maryland, on November 22, 1783. He had been a member of the Maryland State House for nine terms from 1757-1773 and served as treasurer of Frederick County in 1775. Hanson founded a gun-lock company and played an important part in helping to raise troops for the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War. He was a member of the Continental Congress from 1780-1782. While in Congress he helped to settle the western land issue, which facilitated the ratification of the Articles of Confederation. During Hanson's one year in office, he approved the Great Seal of the United States that is still used today, gave orders to the military forces toward the end of the American Revolution, officially "received" General George Washington after the American victory at Yorktown, helped establish the first U.S. Treasury Department, the first Secretary of War, and the first Foreign Affairs Department. While in office he also signed all laws, regulations, official papers, and letters associated with his position.

### **Elias Boudinot (1740-1821)**

Elias Boudinot was the second President of the United States Assembled and served from November 4, 1782 to November 3, 1783. He spent his childhood living beside Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, but spent the majority of his life residing in New Jersey. As a lawyer he often supported the propertied interests, but was an opponent of the loyalist governor of New Jersey, William Franklin (the illegitimate son of Benjamin Franklin). He served on the board of trustees of Princeton College from 1772-1821, and was the commissary general of prisoners from 1776-1779 during the Revolutionary War. He was a member of the Continental Congress in 1778, 1781, 1782 and 1783. As President of the United States in Congress Assembled, he signed the Treaty of Paris in 1783, which officially ended the Revolutionary War. He was elected to the First Congress under the Constitution and served from 1789-1795. Boudinot was the director of the Mint from 1795 - 1805 and was elected as president of the American Bible Society based upon his religious tolerance and his opposition to slavery. He was also a supporter of the rights of Native Americans. He is buried in St. Mary's Protestant Episcopal Church Cemetery in Burlington, New Jersey.

### **Thomas Mifflin (1744-1800)**

Thomas Mifflin was the third President of the United States Assembled and served from November 3, 1783 to June 3, 1784. He was born into a wealthy family in Philadelphia and was educated at the College of Philadelphia, which later became the University of Pennsylvania. He was a member of the American Philosophical Society from 1765-1799. Mifflin served in the Continental Congress from 1774-1775 and 1782 to 1784. During the Revolutionary War, Mifflin served as a Major and the chief aide-de-camp to General George Washington and was appointed Quartermaster General of the Continental Army in 1775. Because of his eventual disagreements with General Washington's military strategy, Mifflin was involved in the Conway Cabal in an unsuccessful effort to replace Washington with General Horatio Gates. He resigned as a Major General in 1779 and served as a trustee of the University of Pennsylvania from 1778-1791. Mifflin was the Speaker of the Pennsylvania State House of Representatives from 1785-1788 and was a delegate to the state constitutional convention that ratified the Federal Constitution in 1787. He served as the Governor of Pennsylvania from 1790-1799. Mifflin died in 1800 and is buried in the Trinity Lutheran Church Cemetery in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

### **Richard Henry Lee (1732-1794)**

Richard Henry Lee was the fourth President of the United States in Congress Assembled and served from November 30, 1784 to November 23, 1785. He was the most successful politician among his four brothers – Arthur, Francis Lightfoot, William and Thomas Ludwell. He was educated by private tutors and completed his education in England before returning to Virginia in 1751. Lee volunteered to fight in the French-Indian war but his services were dismissed because of his age and inexperience. Even though he was from the “planter class” in Virginia, he strongly opposed the policies of the British government and was allied with Patrick Henry. He was elected to the Virginia House of Burgesses in 1758 at the age of 25 and was instrumental in his county supporting the Westmoreland Association (an early agreement to boycott British goods). He served in the Continental Congress from 1774-1779, and is most noted for introducing the resolution for independence in June 1776. He was a Virginia state legislator from 1780-1784 and served in the national Congress again from 1784-1789. He supported the Constitution after the decision was made to include a bill of rights and was elected Senator from Virginia from 1789-1792. However, Lee was forced to resign in 1792 due to poor health. Lee died in 1794, and is buried in the old family burying ground near Hague, Westmoreland County, Virginia.

## John Hancock (1737-1793)

John Hancock was appointed the fifth President of the United States in Congress Assembled and served from November 23, 1785 to June 6, 1786. However, because of poor health he could not successfully serve his term. His presidential duties were performed by David Ramsay (November 23, 1785 - May 12, 1786) and Nathaniel Gorham (May 15 - June 5, 1786) who were two chairmen of the Congress of the Confederation. He was born in North Braintree Massachusetts in 1737 and was orphaned at an early age. His wealthy uncle, Thomas Hancock, adopted him and after graduating from Harvard, Hancock was made a partner in Thomas Hancock and Company. In 1770 he was the head of a committee to investigate the Boston Massacre. He was elected to the Second Continental Congress in 1775 and was its President when the Declaration of Independence was adopted. He, and Samuel Adams, were the two most wanted men in the colonies by King George III. He served as a major general during the Revolutionary War and was elected Governor of Massachusetts from 1780-1785 and 1787 until his death in 1793. He was the seventh President of the United States in Congress assembled, from November 23, 1785 to June 6, 1786. John Hancock was one of the original "fathers" of U.S. independence.

## Nathaniel Gorham (1738-1796)

Nathaniel Gorham was appointed the sixth President of the United States in Congress Assembled and served from June 1786 to November 13, 1786. He was born in Charlestown, Massachusetts and because of a minimal early education, Gorham served as a merchant's apprentice in New London, Connecticut. He was a member of the Massachusetts colonial legislature from 1771-1775 and was Speaker of the Massachusetts General Court from 1781-1785. During the Revolutionary War, the British destroyed much of Gorham's property. Gorham was elected to the national Congress of the Confederation from 1782-1783 and was elected again in 1785. In 1785 he incorporated the Charles River Bridge Corporation that would later be a major Supreme Court Case in 1837. He attended the Constitutional Convention in 1787 and served on the Committee of the Whole and the Committee of Detail. Because of his commercial interests he supported a new constitution that could control interstate commerce, a strong international trade base and the regulation of paper money. He was ruined financially in a questionable land deal between New York and Massachusetts and died of apoplexy in the middle of the crisis at the age of 58 and is buried at the Phipps Street Cemetery in Charlestown, Massachusetts.

## Arthur St. Clair (1737-1818)

Arthur St. Clair was appointed the seventh President of the United States in Congress Assembled and served from February 2, 1787 to October 29, 1787. He was born in Scotland in 1737 and came to America during the French Indian War as part of the British Army's 60th Regiment of Foot. During the war, he was involved in the British capture of Quebec and Louisbourg, but resigned his commission and moved to Boston. He eventually purchased land on the Pennsylvania frontier and was commissioned a colonel in the 2nd Pennsylvania Regiment during the Revolutionary War. St. Clair fought in the turning point battles of Trenton and Princeton and earned the rank of Major General. His abandonment of Fort Ticonderoga during the war was a major area of controversy even though it was viewed as militarily indefensible. The decision to allow the British to recapture the fort cast doubt on St. Clair's military judgment, but he was cleared in a court-martial trial in 1778. He left the army in 1783 and was elected to the Continental Congress from 1785-1787 and was appointed governor of the Northwest Territory in 1789. As a Major General in the newly formed United States army, he was defeated by the Miami Indians on the Ohio frontier, which led to him being removed as governor.

### Cyrus Griffin (1748-1810)

Cyrus Griffin was appointed the eighth President of the United States in Congress Assembled and served from January 22, 1788 to March 4, 1789. He was born in Virginia, studied law in Scotland, continued his studies in London and married Christine Stewart, the daughter of the sixth Earl of Traquair. After the Revolutionary War began, Griffin submitted a plan of reconciliation with the English government, but it was rejected. He served two years as a Virginia state legislator before being elected to the Continental Congress in 1778. Tiring of politics on the national level, Griffin returned to Virginia and was appointed to the Court of Appeals in Cases of Capture (a court set up to mediate areas of dispute between states). His role on the court helped pave the way for the national court system. He returned to the Congress of the Confederation in 1787 along with James Madison and John Brown and served the last term as its president prior to the adoption of the Federal Constitution. He was commissioner to the Creek nation and a judge of the United States District Court of Virginia from 1789 until his death in 1810. He is buried at the Bruton Churchyard in Williamsburg, Virginia.



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