

Declaration of Independence - Signers Series

John Hart - New Jersey

John Hart was likely born in 1713, in Hopewell Township, New Jersey, although both the year and the location have been debated. However, since his parents were living there, since he was baptized there, as were his four younger siblings, it is assumed that was his birthplace. He had minimal education, only learning to read, write and do figures (basic math), with spelling that was not the best, not unlike many of his fellow signers, but he came to be quite well read.

John purchased his homestead plantation of 193 acres in 1740, then later acquiring a mill with his brother Daniel. Hart had many cattle, sheep, pigs, horses and fowl, in addition to having four slaves to work his large farm, which he grew to over 600 acres by the 1770s, the largest in Hopewell. However, when the local Baptist Church needed land for a new church, Hart, a Presbyterian, readily gave them property in his front meadow in 1747.

His public service began in 1750, when he was elected to the Hunterdon County Board of Chosen Freeholders, then in 1755 as Justice of the Peace. That was followed, in 1761, by his election to the Provincial Assembly of New Jersey in which he would continue for several years, and in which he pressed for New Jersey's participation in the Stamp Act Congress in 1765. This non-lawyer was later appointed to the Court of Common Pleas.



by Ole Erikson, Engraver, c1876, Library of Congress

John Hart

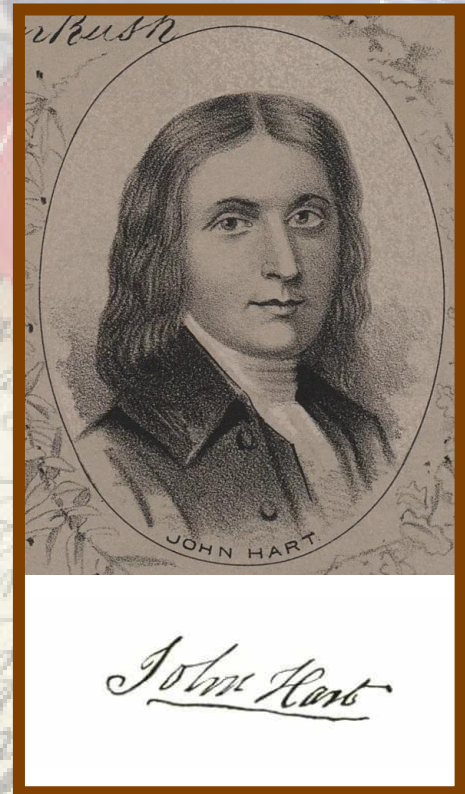
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In 1774, he was elected to a committee to appoint delegates to the First Continental Congress to protest the Tea Act. A year later, he was elected to the Committee of Correspondence for New Jersey, and to the Committee of Safety, which oversaw the welfare of the colony while the Congress was in recess.

1776 was a memorable year for Hart. He was re-elected to the Provincial Congress, then designated to sign the new Bill of Credit note (paper money). He signed 15,583 notes, and received 12 pounds, 10 shillings and 10 pence for that effort, about the value of 3 muskets. Then, on June 22nd, he, along with Abraham Clark, Francis Hopkinson, Richard Stockton and John Witherspoon were elected to the Second Continental Congress, voted for Independence, and signed the Declaration on August 2nd.

Later in August he was elected to the New Jersey State Assembly under its new constitution, and became the Speaker of the Assembly. Shortly thereafter, Hessian mercenaries overran his farm, destroying most of his livestock, mills and other property. A result of the privations caused by that destruction, John's wife's health went into a downward spiral leading to her death on October 8, 1776. Two months later, the Assembly shut down, since its Speaker, John, barely escaped capture by the British, and only survived by living in the forest and sleeping in caves for two months, while the rest of his family was dispersed to friends and other family members.



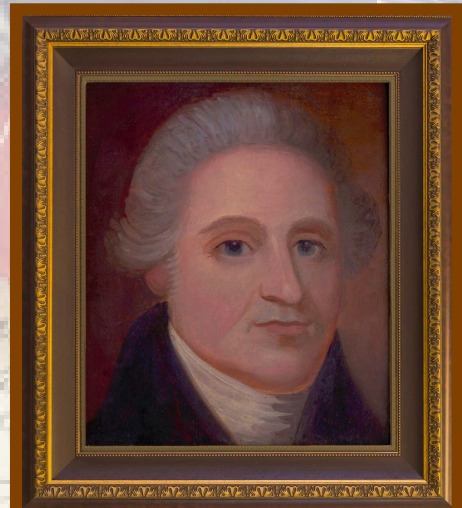
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After George Washington won at the Battle of Princeton, the British and Hessians began to pull out of colony, and John re-opened the Assembly in late January 1777. After twice being re-elected Speaker, he was elected President of Joint meetings of the New Jersey Congress, and became the Commissioner of the New Jersey Loan Office, as which, he signed another 10,000 bill of credit notes.

The highlight of 1778, John's penultimate year, was his inviting The American army of 12,000 men to camp at his farm in June. After resting and preparing for battle for a few days, the army left and engaged the British, essentially to a draw, at the Battle of Monmouth. Although the Americans did not outright win, they did demonstrate a new professionalism from their winter training at Valley Forge.

John Hart continued his Assembly positions but for another four months when he had to retire to his farm in November with a severe case of kidney stones, which only became worse, causing his death on May 9, 1779. Thus, "Honest John," as he was known by his colleagues, had given his all in support of his colony and his country.



John Hart