

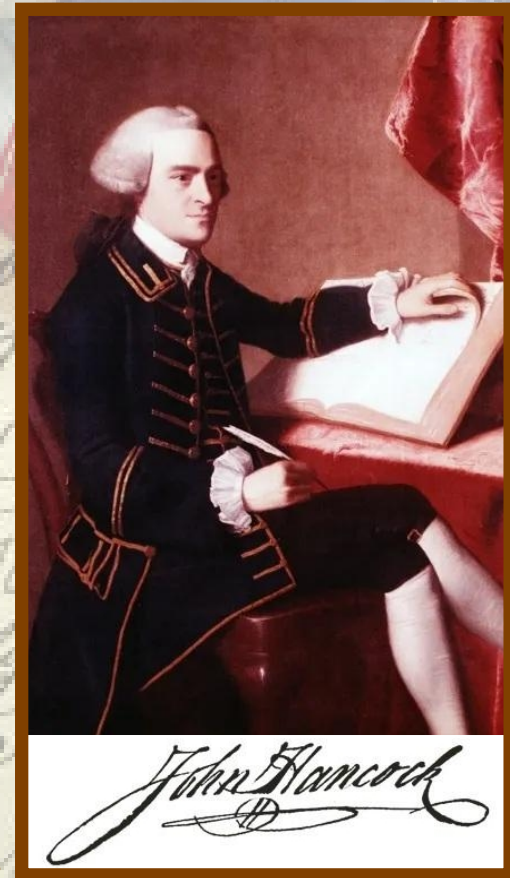
Declaration of Independence - Signers Series

John Hancock - Massachusetts

John Hancock, known for his large signature on the Declaration of Independence, was born on January 12, 1737 in Braintree, Massachusetts, lost his father at age seven, moved with his mother and siblings to his grandfather's house in Lexington, and was adopted by his wealthy merchant uncle, Thomas, that year. At age 17, he graduated from Harvard with a business education, then became a clerk in his uncle's mercantile business. In 1760, his uncle sent him on a business mission to England, where he witnessed the national mourning for the death of King George II, and interacted with the leading businessmen of the day. Only three years later, his uncle died and he inherited the business and a huge fortune, becoming Boston's new merchant king.

Although many of his merchant peers were loyalists, Hancock soon became active in revolutionary politics as he was elected to the Stamp Act Congress in 1765 and then to the Boston Assembly. There, he was one of the first to propose non-importation measures. The news of the Stamp Act's repeal reached Boston on one of his ships. Thus, he announced the repeal at a selectman's meeting. In 1768, his sloop *Liberty* was impounded by customs officials for running contraband goods, after which a large group of citizens beat the officers with clubs, and burned the customs post and government boat.

Hancock later abetted the Tea Party, and on the occasion of the anniversary of the Boston Massacre in 1774, delivered an oration "in most indignant terms of the acts and measures of the British Government." The following year when a general pardon was granted to many of the agitators in Boston, Hancock and Samuel Adams were excluded.



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Elected to the Continental Congress, he succeeded Peyton Randolph as President, presiding over the debate on the Declaration of Independence, and thus became the first to sign the parchment copy on August 2, 1776. John Hancock's famously large signature on the Declaration of Independence wasn't just a random flourish – it was a deliberate act of symbolism. According to legend, he wanted to make sure King George III could "read it without spectacles". Signing the Declaration was a treasonous act under British law. A large, visible signature was a symbolic act of courage – he wasn't trying to hide his support, he was proudly declaring it.

His leadership in this Congress continued for the next 15 months until America's first constitution, the Articles of Confederation was approved in November 1777. Although resigning from Congress in early 1778, he was guest moderator over the Massachusetts House of Representatives as it became the first colony to ratify that document.

Two years later he was overwhelmingly elected the first governor of the Massachusetts Commonwealth, a position he held until 1785. Later that year, he was elected President of Congress, the first person to be elected to two non-consecutive terms. Later, in January 1788, he guided the Massachusetts Convention through his influence to ratify the U.S. Constitution. He became that state's first Governor in 1789, with Samuel Adams as Lieutenant Governor, both being re-elected in 1790 and 1791.

While still in office, Hancock passed away on October 8, 1793. It is said that on the day of his funeral, that 20,000 people joined the funeral cortège to the Old Granary Burial Grounds. Years later John Adams would say of him, "If benevolence, charity, generosity was ever personified in North America, they were in John Hancock,"

