

This Day in History... January 23, 1737

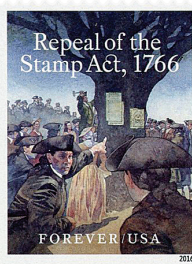
Birth of Statesman John Hancock

John Hancock was born on January 23, 1737, in Braintree, Massachusetts.

As a child, he was a casual acquaintance of John Adams. After his father's death in 1744, Hancock went to live with a wealthy aunt and uncle who exported rum, whale oil, and fish.

Hancock attended Harvard College and graduated in 1754. He then began working for his uncle as the French and Indian War began.

During this time, Hancock learned a great deal about his uncle's business, in which he would one day become a partner. As part of his work, Hancock spent a couple of years in England establishing a relationship with customers and suppliers. By 1763, Hancock returned to America and was a full partner, filling in for his sick uncle. After his uncle died the following year, Hancock inherited the business and family home, Hancock Manor.



Issued for the 250th anniversary of the repeal of the Stamp Act.



This se-tenant strip of four was issued to commemorate Hancock's signing of the Declaration of Independence.

In 1764, the British Parliament passed a Sugar Act, the first direct tax on the colonies. Many were outraged that they were being taxed by a government where they weren't represented. As a merchant, Hancock initially criticized the act for economic reasons. However, the following year he took a greater interest in politics and was elected one of Boston's five selectmen (a governing board for the city). When Parliament passed the Stamp Act in 1765, Hancock initially supported it as a loyal British subject, but soon changed his mind and joined in the boycott of British goods.

As a rising figure in local politics, Hancock was elected to the Massachusetts House of Representatives in May 1766. Many credit Samuel Adams in Hancock's political success.

In 1767, the British passed the Townshend Acts, establishing new duties on imports and strengthening the customs agency. The new acts infuriated both merchants and smugglers. On a few separate occasions, customs officials that suspected Hancock of smuggling goods boarded his ships. The first time, he refused to allow them to go below the deck, a moment some considered to be one of the first acts of resistance against the British before the Revolution.

In another incident, a riot broke out aboard Hancock's ship, leading custom's officials to declare they were unsafe and demand British troops be sent to Boston. As a result, Hancock's ship was confiscated and used by the British for anti-smuggling operations before being burned by angry colonists. Hancock was also brought up on charges, which were later inexplicably dropped. Because of these incidents, many historical texts have described him as a smuggler, though there are no physical records to prove this.

In the wake of Hancock's trial, British troops were stationed in Boston. Tensions between the soldiers and citizens escalated, leading to the Boston Massacre, in which five civilians were killed. Hancock threatened that if the British troops weren't removed, 10,000 armed colonists would march into Boston. While the British didn't believe him, they didn't want to risk their own men's lives and removed them from the town. Hancock was hailed as a hero and almost unanimously re-elected to the

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Massachusetts House.

After the British partially repealed the Townshend duties in 1770, tensions were slightly alleviated. However, the 1773 Tea Act once again outraged the colonists. Hancock attended the December 16 meeting that preceded the Boston Tea Party. Though he didn't participate in it or publicly praise it, he did tell those in attendance that night, "Let every man do what is right in his own eyes."

Hancock didn't attend the First Continental Congress, either due to health reasons or to remain in charge while other patriots were away. But in 1774, he was elected president of the Provincial Congress, which created the first companies of minutemen. At the end of the year, Hancock was elected as a delegate to the Second Continental Congress. He was also reelected president of the Provincial Congress. Both roles gave him a considerable amount of influence, leading the British to think about arresting him. In fact, in April 1775, as the British made their way to seize military supplies at Concord, they may have also included orders to arrest Hancock and Samuel Adams. Part of Paul Revere's famous midnight ride included delivering a warning to Hancock that the British were coming and might try to arrest him.

Hancock evaded British capture and attended the Continental Congress in May 1775. He was unanimously elected president of the Continental Congress. His role was somewhat undefined but included a lot of correspondence. He wrote letters to colonial officials, raised funds for supplies and recruitment for the army. He also chaired the Marine Committee and helped establish a small fleet of frigates, including one named in his honor.

Hancock also presided over the Congress when the Declaration of Independence was adopted. Although the declaration was approved on July 4, 1776, it wasn't signed by all the delegates that day as is often believed. It was first sent out to a printer. But as president of the Congress, Hancock was the only delegate whose name appeared on the first printed version of the declaration. And it wasn't until August 2 that he signed his now-famous large signature on the carefully handwritten version of the declaration.

After more than two years in Congress, Hancock took a leave of absence in October 1777. He returned home to Boston where he was re-elected to the House of Representatives. In addition to lending a lot of his own money to the war effort, Hancock also gave money to the poor in Boston, making him even more popular among the people. The following year he briefly returned to Congress and joined in the signing of the Articles of Confederation, before returning to Boston. Having previously served as a colonel of the Boston Cadets, Hancock had always longed for a military position, especially with the start of the Revolution. He was made a senior major general in the Massachusetts militia and given command of 6,000 men. Though the ensuing attack on the British garrison at Newport Rhode Island was a failure, Hancock was still a popular figure. He went on to become a charter member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

In 1780, Hancock was elected governor of Massachusetts, winning over 90% of the vote. He remained in that role until resigning in 1785. Many suspect it was to avoid dealing with the unrest that resulted in Shay's Rebellion. Following the uprising, he was reelected governor every year until his death. In the meantime, he was also part of the Massachusetts convention to ratify the Constitution. In 1789, Hancock was a candidate in the presidential election, though he only won four electoral votes.

After suffering health issues for many years, Hancock died in his home, Hancock Manor, on October 8, 1793. His long-time friend Samuel Adams was acting governor following his death and made the date of his burial a state holiday. His funeral was one of the most lavish up to that time.



Revere stamp from the Liberty Series



Hancock (seated at the table on the right) is one of 42 people depicted in this stamp!



Stamp commemorating the 200th anniversary of the drafting of the Articles of Confederation.

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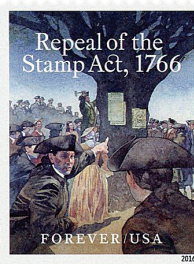
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