

JOHN HANCOCK: A CHARACTER SKETCH

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John Hancock: A Character Sketch by John R. Musick

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JOHN R. MUSICK

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John Hancock



JOHN HANCOCK

A CHARACTER SKETCH

BY

JOHN R. MUSICK

Author of "The Columbian Historical Novels," "Hawaii, Our New Possessions," etc.

WITH ANECDOTES, CHARACTERISTICS AND
CHRONOLOGY



CHICAGO

THE UNIVERSITY ASSOCIATION

Association Building

1712.3
45.12
1897

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Excl.
G. H. Eklund Jr. et.
13.2.30



In these modern days of iconoclasm and skepticism, many honored and beloved heroes of the past are lowered to the common level of ordinary mankind. While iconoclasm is certainly carried to an extreme, nevertheless it is productive of good, in teaching that the great men of history whom we worshiped, were after all, the common clay of ordinary mortals.

Some were great men, and some were bad men, hardly worthy a place on the page of history. This tendency of writers of recent years to disparage the founders of our government, and heroes who won the independence we enjoy, with their blood, is possibly the natural reaction of writers of the preceding age to canonize them.

While "our forefathers" were only human, and by no means demigods as some past writers would represent them, they on the other hand were not the coarse, bigoted, evil minded individuals, represented by the critic of the present.

In defence of them we are pleased to state that after a careful study and research, we conclude that most of

them were honorable gentlemen, whose society was elevating, morals good, with pleasing address, and many like Washington, would "scorn some of the acts common with politicians of the present."

The charge of bribery to obtain position in any of the legislative bodies was never laid at their door, nor were corruption funds known at that time.

A recent writer in an American magazine with little reverence for the man whose bold signature first strikes the eye in glancing over the list of signers to the Declaration of Independence, asserts that John Hancock was a smuggler, a defaulter, and a man whose "private character will not bear a too close inspection." That the writer is prejudiced is evident from his failure to give the evidence for, as well as against the accused.

John Hancock, whose chief celebrity is his signature to the Declaration of Independence, was born of respectable parents, at Quincy, Massachusetts, January 12, 1737. Perhaps less is known of him than of any Revolutionary hero, or any other person who had so much to do with the growth of liberty and independence.

His family was not only respectable but influential, and his uncle who seemed to have had much to do with his career, was at one time one of the wealthiest, if not the wealthiest man in Boston.

Hancock grew up from early boyhood accustomed to polite society. History fails to record the fact that he developed any rare genius early in youth, but was simply a respectable, good mannered lad, obedient to his superiors, and a faithful scholar in school. He early

acquired a gentility which followed him through life. He entered Harvard College at an early age, and his advancement must have been phenomenal, for he was graduated at the age of seventeen.

Hancock's subsequent connection with Harvard was such as to give rise to grave suspicions. Being treasurer of the College he was so slow in making his settlements as to afford his enemies an opportunity for censure, yet the best authority to be obtained acquits him of any blame. On this subject Burrage says:

"Quincy, in his history of Harvard University, animadvert strongly on Hancock, saying: 'His connection with the college was troublesome and vexatious.' As early as 1774, when they sent for the papers at Philadelphia, where Hancock had taken them for safety, seeming to fear he would lose them, the officers commenced to write and almost dictate to him about his accounts. Obtaining the documents they displaced him from his honorable office in 1777; an act which Hancock and his friends never forgave.

"Hancock frequently assured them that he had the interest of the college at heart as much as any one, and would pursue it; and the records show that he honorably fulfilled the terms of his uncle's intended bequest of Five Hundred Pounds to the library, and made liberal gifts to the same himself.

"The officers passed a vote of thanks for this lasting monument of his bounty and public affection. In 1788 he made a final settlement, but it was left to his heirs to pay over the full amount due, except the charge for

compound interest." The president of the New England Historical Society, January 1, 1896, in reference to the matter of Hancock's shortage in his accounts, says:

"Hancock had a very long controversy with the authorities at Harvard College about the funds in his hands as treasurer. His action in this matter is perfectly unaccountable. It vexed the treasurer who succeeded him, and all the committees appointed to settle with him, to the last degree, and the alumni never forgave him. The college lost nothing but rather gained by the delay, except in the matters of interest, which his executors would not pay."

The friendly reader who follows the narrative of Hancock through the troublous days of 1774 to 1777 when he was removed as treasurer of Harvard, may easily find abundant excuse for his course of action, which when we take into consideration the fact, that defalcation was never his design, ought to exonerate him from any evil intent.

Hancock at this time had his enemies as well as friends; enemies who were ever ready to criticise that portion of his conduct which they could not understand, and this may in part account for some of the scurrilous stories derogatory to his honesty.

After graduating from Harvard College at the early age of seventeen, he was taken under the guardianship of a pious uncle, who made him a clerk in his counting room, where with his native aptitude, he soon became acquainted with the various routine of business.

Hancock was quite in contrast with his Puritanic as-