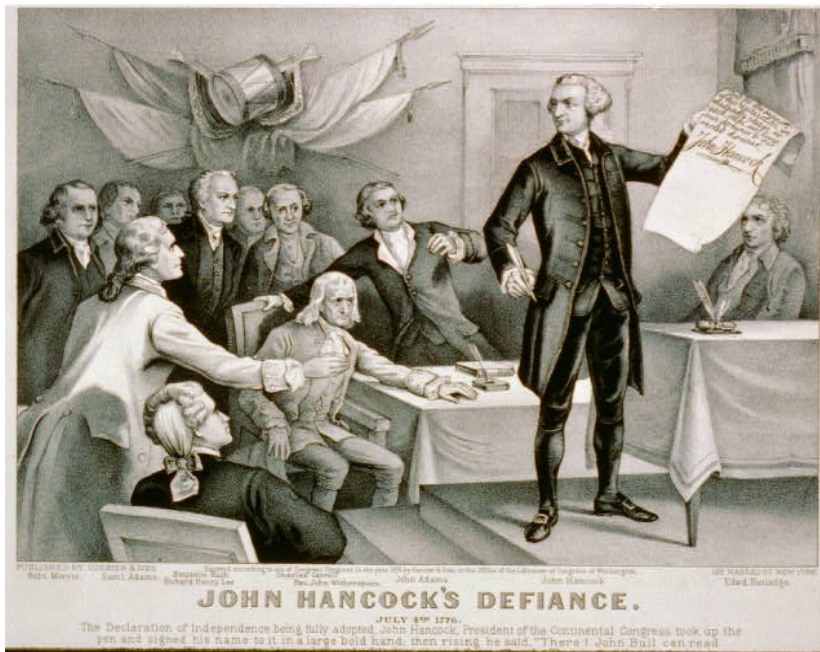
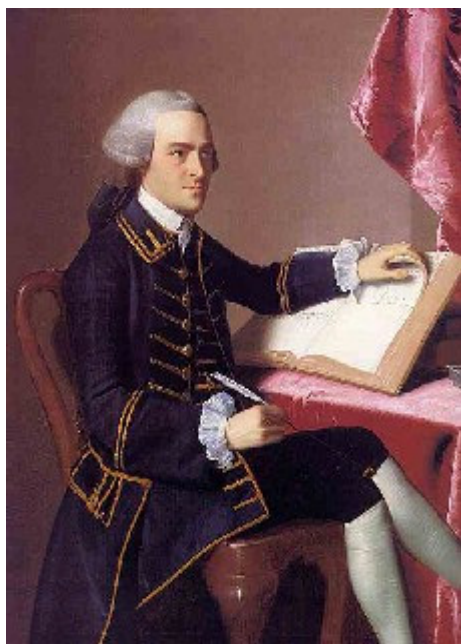


“There, I guess King George will be able to read that!” John Hancock of Massachusetts



Source: Library of Congress

Few signatures have left such an indelible mark in American history. But when John Hancock signed his name on the Declaration of Independence, he did so in such flamboyant style as if to make his signature easily the most recognizable of all. Although stories of Hancock's action in Philadelphia's Independence Hall in the summer of 1776 cannot be corroborated, some accounts claim that after he signed the document the delegate from Massachusetts commented that "the British ministry can read that name without spectacles." Another report indicates that Hancock proudly declared that "There, I guess King George will be able to read that!" Whatever was said or was not said by Hancock on that warm July day in the midst of the American Revolution, the flamboyant life of the successful merchant, privateer, and American patriot is equally as engaging.

Born in Braintree, Massachusetts in 1737 to Reverend John Hancock and Mary Hawke, the young radical firebrand soon became a childhood friend of John Adams (2nd President of the United States), who lived in a part of Braintree that later branched off and was incorporated as the city of Quincy, Massachusetts. His father later died and the young Hancock was adopted by his uncle, Thomas Hancock, a wealthy merchant and privateer in Boston that longed for a child of his own. Educated at some of Boston most prestigious schools including Harvard University, Hancock moved on and quickly learned his uncle's trade in the shipbuilding business. He spent two years in England cultivating business relationships among his uncle's customers and suppliers. During his time overseas, Hancock witnessed the coronation of King George III and moved within the circles of England's leading businessmen. When his uncle became gravely ill in 1763, he made his adopted son a full partner. Assuming the leading role in his uncle's business, Hancock amassed so much wealth that by the time his uncle died shortly thereafter, the young tycoon was one of the wealthiest men in America.

Hancock's wealth led some in the American colonies, who were attempting to undermine the British monarchy and Parliament, to suspect that his loyalties resided with the loyalists, who maintained their allegiance to the mother country throughout the Revolution. Hancock's political sentiments, however, like a prevailing wind, lay with the burgeoning revolutionary opposition to the British monarchy among the colonists.

While English merchants routinely paid duties on imports, many American merchants attempted to subvert the British Empire by evading payment and smuggling cheap goods such as sugar and molasses from other nations. Known by British officials in England and the colonies as a notorious smuggler who shirked paying the duties imposed by Parliament on Americans, Hancock's smuggling practices financed much of Boston's resistance to British authority. Some Bostonians even joked that Samuel Adams, a well-known radical, writes the letters to the newspapers and Hancock pays the postage. Hancock smuggled an estimated 1.5 million gallons of molasses a year on which he should have paid 37,500 pounds, but which corrupt custom officials only collected 2,000 pounds per year.

Hancock's open contempt for British officials led some to single him out among the radicals to serve as an example to other smugglers seeking to get around payment on duties imposed by Parliament. Custom commissioners in Boston undertook a vendetta against Hancock in April 1768 when the wealthy merchant had two tidesmen, minor Custom officials, forcibly removed from his ship the *Lydia* after they were caught below deck snooping for smuggled goods. One of the officials was ruffed up by one of Hancock's sailors who picked the man up and dumped him unceremoniously on deck. When the British official attempted to file a criminal suit against Hancock, the attorney general of the colony declined to proceed with the case on the grounds that Hancock had acted legally within his rights because they went below deck without authorization.

With British officials furious that Hancock and the attorney general's actions had undermined royal authority, they set about to catch him once again when his ship the *Liberty* tied up in Boston Harbor on May 9, 1768. The *Liberty* carried a cargo of twenty-five casks of wine from Madeira, which was unloaded the next day when Hancock paid the required duty. Meanwhile, two British officials kept a close watch on the ship and observed that during the next month, the *Liberty's* crew loaded board barrels of whale oil and tar, but that nothing else was removed from the ship. On June 10, British officials seized the ship when one of the tidesmen assigned to observe the crew's actions, Thomas Kirk, told a story that he had in fact been held captive below the *Liberty's* deck while large quantities of wine, in excess of the twenty-five casks officially recorded, were illegally unloaded. Kirk swore that he had been locked away after he refused to take a bribe from one of Hancock's captains. The other tidesman could not corroborate Kirk's story because, according to Kirk, he had been at home, asleep after a long night of drinking. The story seemed trumped up as yet another attempt by the British to punish Hancock and serve as an example for colonial merchants and other obnoxious radicals bent on resisting royal authority. When customs seized the *Liberty* a mob of thousands gathered in the streets to hunt down all British officials who were not only pelted with bust also had their windows smashed with rocks.

Hancock barely escaped with his life when the war for American Independence commenced. As the British prepared to march on Concord on the evening of April 18, 1775, John Hancock and Samuel Adams were lodging at Jonas Clarke's parsonage in Lexington. At the direction of Joseph Warren of the Committee of Safety in Boston, Paul Revere, William Dawes, and other couriers were dispatched to warn the townspeople of the impending British strike. At approximately midnight that evening, Revere galloped up to Clarke's and found militiamen posted outside to safeguard Hancock and Adams. When the guard notified Revere that the Clarke household had asked not to be disturbed by any noise, Revere exclaimed, "Noise! You'll have noise enough before long. The regulars are coming out!" While Hancock and Adams made a hasty retreat through the Massachusetts countryside, the British converged on Lexington and the first shots of the American Revolution were fired.

Sources: Robert A. Gross, *The Minutemen and their World* (1976); Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789* (1982); Edmund S. Morgan, *The Birth of the Republic*, 3rd ed. (1992); and Harlow G. Unger, *John Hancock: Merchant King and American Patriot* (2000)