

A DEFENSE OF JOHN HANCOCK
FROM CHARGES MADE BY
STEPHEN HIGGINSON IN THE LACO LETTERS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Until 1961 I was a Canadian citizen. Most of my high school education took place in Canadian schools, consequently the little knowledge of American History that I acquired had a definite bias towards the British participation in the American Revolution. One name that did interest me was John Hancock; the reason, I suppose, was his famous signature on the Declaration of Independence.

In 1955 my family moved to California and I completed my high school education which included a course in American History. I was surprised to see so little mention of Hancock in the history text. As I continued in college it became apparent that Hancock was a controversial figure, being praised in some texts and criticized in others. My curiosity drove me to make a closer inspection of Hancock. It was during this endeavor that I came upon Herbert S. Allan's book, John Hancock: Patriot in Purple, in which the name Stephen Higginson was mentioned in conjunction with the Laco Letters. Who was Higginson? What connections did he have with Hancock? What were the Laco Letters? Why had Higginson launched such a verbal attack on Hancock through the Laco Letters? These questions led me to investigate the controversy and the results are the basis for this

paper.

Stephen Higginson was a merchant and politician from Salem, Massachusetts. He served on both the state and national level and was an ardent supporter of James Bowdoin. He was not only a commercial rival of John Hancock, but a political rival as well, since Hancock was opposed by Bowdoin for the governorship in Massachusetts.

Higginson, using the pen name of Laco, made a bitter attack on Hancock in a series of articles known as the Laco Letters. These articles appeared in the Massachusetts Centinel in February and March of 1789. Higginson hoped to draw support away from Hancock as a result of these articles.

There have been other authors who have mentioned Hancock in connection with the Laco Letters, but to my knowledge no direct defense of Hancock from charges made in the Letters has been attempted. I believe Hancock was innocent of the charges and therefore I have chosen to defend him in this paper. I have relied heavily on the works of other historians such as John Hancock: His Book by Abram E. Brown, Patriot in Purple by Herbert S. Allan, and Life and Times of Stephen Higginson by Thomas Higginson as primary resource material. It has been a difficult task to compile much information from original manuscripts since there are so few available on Hancock. Unavailibility of

materials has not afforded me an opportunity to make as great a use of microfilm or copies of manuscripts as I would have liked to have done.

CHAPTER II

THE INQUISITOR, THE ACCUSED, THE ACCUSATIONS

The revolutionary movement that swept through the thirteen colonies and culminated in their independence in 1776 produced many outstanding individuals who have been given the title of patriot. One such notable individual who made a valuable contribution to the revolutionary cause, and who later rose to the highest political office in his state's government was John Hancock. There has been a great deal of controversy concerning Hancock's career. He has been the subject of praise as well as the subject of criticism. One of his most biting critics was Stephen Higginson, who in 1789 appointed himself to be a critic of Hancock and who was by no means a stranger to politics having had many interests in common with Hancock.

Both men shared a common interest in the business world. Both began to take an active interest in politics at about the same time and gave a great deal of their time and talents to promote the revolutionary cause. Higginson was born on November 28, 1743 in Salem, Massachusetts and became the wealthiest merchant in that city. He became a member of the Continental Congress and served on several committees while a member of that body. In 1771 he was called to England and testified before the British House of Commons on the

conditions in the colonies at that time. During the Revolutionary War, Higginson pursued a very lucrative business as a privateer, a position that most of the merchants of that time, including John Hancock, had adopted.

After the war Higginson returned to politics. In 1782 he was elected as a justice of the peace and later in the same year, he became a member of the Massachusetts Legislature. In late 1782, he was elected as a representative to the Congress serving until 1787. In 1788 he returned to state affairs when he was made a member of the Quorum. This body was a select number of justices of the peace, some of whom on account of their skill and discretion, were required to be present at the sessions of court. Soon after, he was replaced by Hancock who had chosen to step down from the governor's office. Bowdoin, who was the governor at that time, reappointed Higginson to the Quorum. Perhaps Higginson's later great dislike for Hancock was stimulated as a result of this action.

John Hancock, born in Braintree, Massachusetts on January 12, 1736, was the wealthiest merchant in Boston. Hancock also became involved in politics and represented Boston in the General Court. Later he presided over the Second Continental Congress where he affixed his well known signature to the Declaration of Independence. During the Revolutionary War, Hancock was engaged in privateering.

After the war Hancock chose to concentrate on state politics and rose rapidly to the governor's office where he served for nine terms from 1780 to 1793. Hancock was absent from office for two terms, choosing to resign because of gout in early 1785.

Hancock chose to run again for the office of governor in 1789 after the two-term absence. Higginson supported the incumbent candidate, Bowdoin, and in so doing he penned the Laco Letters. The purpose of these letters was to discredit Hancock in order to cause his defeat. The contents of the ten letters were very repetitious and centered around the following themes. He attacked Hancock's personality, suggesting that his great wealth had made him very vain and allowed him to become lavish with his money in order to gain the attention and support of the people. Because of his wealth he was considered to be a useful instrument by the revolutionary leaders, but was never given anything to do of great importance. Higginson claimed that Hancock was inattentive to his business and was not very efficient in managing his affairs. He was also accused of being a poor politician, relying on the work and reputation of others to gain popularity. Hancock's patriotism was challenged as Higginson charged that the great patriot had deserted the troops during the Rhode Island campaign of 1778.

Another charge made in the letters was that Hancock

was incapable of good administration and that he had done very little for the adoption of the Federal Constitution in Massachusetts. Hancock's health was questioned by Higginson. He accused Hancock of using poor health as an excuse for not taking part in the vital issues of the day. Higginson believed that Hancock's resignation from office in 1785 ~~for~~ health reasons was just an excuse to try to regain his supposed declining popularity. He also claimed that Hancock had no interest within the community at large.

The campaign of 1789 proved to be a very bitter political battle. In an attempt to remain anonymous, Higginson used the pen name of Laco. Being a supporter of Bowdoin, he hoped to draw votes from the Hancock faction by heaping discredit upon him. It was ironical that Hancock was accused of being a poor businessman. Perhaps Higginson was recalling his own experiences, for in the last decade of the eighteenth century his worth was valued at about \$500,000, and yet when he retired from business and politics in 1823 this amount had dwindled to only \$130,000.

The author of the Laco Letters was never just to John Hancock, and as a result a shadow was cast upon the work and life of a great American patriot. It is the purpose of this paper to attempt to refute these charges and that the credit that he so richly deserves may be given to Hancock.

CHAPTER III

HANCOCK THE BUSINESSMAN

Politics in America has undergone very little change since the latter days of the eighteenth century. It remains essentially a contest between individuals with their talents and abilities to win the confidence and trust of the voting public. Sometimes verbal battles are carried on in an atmosphere of mutual friendship and understanding, and sometimes they are conducted in a vicious and harmful manner in an attempt to draw support away from a popular candidate. The campaign for the office of governor in the State of Massachusetts between John Hancock and James Bowdoin was an example of the latter type of campaign. Each side had many loyal supporters. In an attempt to draw support away from Hancock, an infamous attack on his character was made by Stephen Higginson in a series of articles known as the Loco Letters, which appeared in the Massachusetts Centinel in 1789. In these articles Hancock was accused of being a poor manager and a poorer businessman, and this concept has been associated with the great patriot to this day.

John Hancock was not the poor businessman that Higginson pictures in his writings. He was a better than average trader who was a victim of his times. William T. Baxter wrote of Hancock,

"He was heavily handicapped during his whole term of management. Few things stand out more clearly from Hancock's story than the strong rhythms that were imparted to trade by wars, and John was unlucky enough to take over the reins during a long downswing. At their best, the post war years seldom offered chances so golden as those which Thomas had enjoyed; at their worst, they were times during which trade was brought to a dead stop by political troubles."¹

Hancock was determined to keep the "House of Hancock" at the high level of business that had been maintained under his uncle Thomas; however, he was not to enjoy the same success in business activity as had his uncle. Between 1650 and 1763 the American colonists enjoyed great economic opportunity and prosperity because the interest of the colonists often were parallel to those of the mother country.² Bounties offered for certain products were a source of wealth and most harmful legislation was either evaded or not enforced. Many Americans became rich through privateering and smuggling. The Hancock's, Thomas and John, were no exception for John C. Miller wrote in his book Origins of the American Revolution, "the origins of the Hancock family fortune, in particular, would not have borne scrutiny by customhouse officers."³ It

¹William T. Baxter, The House of Hancock Business in Boston 1724-1775 (New York: Russell and Russell Inc., 1965), p. 294.

²Harold Faulkner, American Economic History (Seventh Edition, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954), p. 113.

³John C. Miller, Origins of the American Revolution (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1943), p. 90.

must be pointed out here, that although Hancock was engaged in smuggling activities he was only pursuing a business that was common to the merchants during this time.

The Seven Years War, with its huge demands for provisions also brought added prosperity to the colonies. British army contractors paid very high prices in order to supply adequately the armed forces during the war.⁴

Continuing in his uncle's footsteps, Hancock was a steady, punctual, industrious, indefatigable man of business, having had his training during the war years when money flowed into the colonies.⁵ Yet, it was not to be his fortune to have the great financial success that had come to his uncle, for the post war slump was to put money at a premium in the colonies. Several leading houses in Boston had collapsed in 1764. Baxter said,

"One phase of New England's commerce had come to its end; moreover, the first British empire had reached its apex and was soon to decline headlong. No Boston merchant would enjoy peace of mind for the next two decades."⁶

The Seven Years War left England with a huge national debt estimated at £125,000,000 to £136,000,000 and a force

⁴Lawrence H. Gipson, The Coming of the Revolution (First Edition, New York: Harper, 1954), p. 11.

⁵A. E. Brown, John Hancock: His Book (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1898), p. 117.

⁶Baxter, House of Hancock, p. 225.

of 6,000 troops in America. Taxes had risen to a high level in the mother country. The British were determined to raise revenue in the colonies by taxation to offset the cost of governing the colonies and to subordinate the colonists to British commercial interests.⁷ Taxes were not new to the colonists for the British had been taxing the colonies for over one hundred years. The colonists were also disgruntled over the new taxes since the British government had never, until 1764, clearly stated that taxes were being imposed for revenue purposes. However, in 1764 the British began to enforce the laws to raise the necessary revenue to finance their objectives in the colonies.

The colonists were also feeling the economic pinch since they were in the midst of a post war depression. Nearly all of the hard money in the colonies had gone to the West Indies in trade. The Currency Act of 1764 threatened to leave the colonies without a medium of exchange for carrying on any business.⁸ All thirteen of the colonies were suffering from the mercantilist theory of trade. The heavy restrictions placed on their commerce was an added burden on the already poor money situation. The duties of the Sugar

⁷Charles and May Beard, A Basic History of the United States (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1944), p. 99.

⁸John Braeman, The Road to Independence (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1963), p. 37.

Act were also helping to diminish the volume of colonial trade since the duties were having to be paid in silver and this was draining America of its specie thus making it impossible for merchants to import from England to the same extent as had been done in the past.⁹

The Stamp Act complimented the Sugar Act. When the efforts of the Americans, through the Declaration of Grievances prepared at the Stamp Act Congress, failed to cause the Parliament to act, a boycott of English goods was started which was to last until the act was repealed. Hancock joined the boycott with the other merchants. Several companies were forced to close their doors to business, yet, for one small bill, Hancock was clear. But money was scarce and trade was slow.¹⁰

"John Hancock and other far-seeing merchants of the time detected the impending ruin of the country when the Stamp Act was passed. It was aimed directly at commerce in which lay the key to the situation; and it was to them and their correspondents in London that more credit was due for the repeal of that Act than was due to those who made the recorded speeches."¹¹

The demand for British goods fell off greatly and exports from England declined from £925,565 to £580,324 in 1765.¹²

⁹Carl Becker, The Eve of the Revolution (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1918), p. 105.

¹⁰Baxter, House of Hancock, p. 232.

¹¹Brown, John Hancock: His Book, p. 252.

¹²Ernest Bogart and Donald Kemmerer, Economic History

The spring of 1766 was to bring great promise for the American merchant. The boycott of 1765 did not hurt Hancock as expected, instead spring sales zoomed in 1766. However, this was to be enjoyed for a short time only as the winter months were to bring a period of dull trade with little profit flowing into Hancock's coffers. In October 1767 the Boston merchants again signed a non-importation agreement against England which was to result in a decline of imports into New England of slightly more than one half of the level at the time the agreement went into effect.

In 1768 the business picture did not improve greatly for the American merchant. The non-importation agreements were not to be on a voluntary basis, as before, and demands for political action were becoming more vigorous. There are varying opinions concerning the merchant losses in the colonies during this period of colonial boycotting. Faulkner quotes the merchant losses as going from £363,000 in 1768 to £504,000 in 1769.¹³ The loss according to Gipson was £700,000.¹⁴ Dupuy states the loss figures as £2,157,218 to £1,336,122 from 1768 to 1769.¹⁵

of the American People (Second Edition, New York: Longman's, Green and Company, 1947), p. 170.

¹³Faulkner, American Economic History, p. 117.

¹⁴Gipson, Coming Revolution, p. 197.

¹⁵Ernest R. Dupuy and Trevor N. Dupuy, The Compact

The merchants continued their policy of non-consumption causing business to fall off in New England nearly two-thirds in 1769. New British shipping regulations caused a four-fifths reduction in the number of ships sailing between the mainland and the West Indies. This unhealthy business climate did not afford Hancock much opportunity to make a great success in business as had been done by his uncle.

It is not the intention of this writer to create the impression that Hancock was not without fault as a businessman. Certainly he made blunders, some grave blunders, but he also made some good business deals. In his first venture, upon the advice of Harrison and Bernard, his English creditors, he expanded his dealings in oil and whalebone. He tried to buy all the available market oil, but prices dropped sharply. Only a profit of thirty percent in his whalebone dealings kept him from going deeply into debt. However, it must also be recognized that travel and communications were very slow and it was difficult, at best, to keep abreast of changing market conditions. Since he was thrown so abruptly into his new position as head of the Hancock House, he put his trust in his English creditors, because of his uncle's long association with them. Were they not as much to blame, if not more, for leading Hancock into such a blunder in the

oil market?

Even with such a poor start, his reputation as a business leader grew. He was constantly being asked to help struggling beginners. The lack of currency made it difficult to collect from those indebted to him and drove him to use various exchange devices to settle accounts. As a result of the boycotts many businesses were closed and yet Hancock supported them loyally. His imports fell to £2,000 during these times. What little business he had, consisted of goods not on the boycott list. This caused him to lose the confidence of Harrison and Bernard and his business with them was terminated. His vast oil holdings provided him with enough business to build a satisfactory balance with his new agent, George Hayley, and he was able to pay off his debt to his former creditors.

The beginning of 1774 saw Hancock in debt to Hayley for £11,000 and yet he did not end in bankruptcy. At this time he was considered by some to be a bad risk. The Boston Port Bill was to go into effect on June 1 and Hancock acted promptly. He sent enough consignments to Hayley to net £13,000 and was able to reduce his obligations to all of his foreign creditors to a pittance before the start of the revolution and a balance in his favor before its close. As Baxter notes "He still owned at least £13,000 of bonds and notes, while his estates had grown broader than ever, thanks

to large grants of frontier land from a greatful country."¹⁶

For a man to be as poor as the Laco Letters try to make Hancock appear, in the face of such adversity, would he not have ended in bankruptcy instead of being a man of wealth as was Hancock until his death?

¹⁶Baxter, House of Hancock, p. 288.

CHAPTER IV

THE PATRIOT?

In the time-honored tradition of political campaigns, the friction that is generated between opposing factions sometimes causes a shifting away from the issues to a series of attacks from both sides upon the characters of the two political competitors. Such was the case in 1789.

Higginson, rather than contest the issues of the day, attempted to draw votes away from Hancock by criticizing Hancock's reputation as a statesman and patriot. It was Higginson's contention that Hancock had no political talent of his own and gained prominence only by sharing in the laurels and reputation gained by other political leaders of the day. Higginson's charges are false as may be seen by tracing briefly the political career of John Hancock and showing that he was a political leader of great stature.

Having been tutored by his uncle Thomas during the prosperous times of the Seven Years War, it was only natural for John Hancock to support the King and for this he was labelled a Tory. He first heard talk of union for independence from radicals like John Adams before he went to London in 1760. He had been sent to London by his uncle to learn more of the shipping business.

Sam Adams has been given credit for winning Hancock

over to the patriot cause which was a key factor for persuading the masses in Massachusetts to join in the independence movement. "The adherence to the liberal cause of a leader with wealth, rank, and political address may well have swung round a multitude of waverers, and so have tipped the scales at a decisive moment."¹ He first met Sam Adams in 1770 at the home of John Adams, his boyhood friend, at which time he gave Sam Adams a loan for the payment of his taxes. After listening to the Adams' cousins, he began to take an active part in the resistance movement.

Hancock made his entrance into politics in March of 1765 being chosen a selectman to the Boston town meeting. In the years to come, the town meeting was to raise a voice that grew steadily louder in opposition to the British policies.

Hancock became more outspoken as time passed and attacked the Stamp Act as being unconstitutional. His letters to his foreign agents indicated feelings that were not any different than those expressed in some of the papers of the times.²

His next political adventure, in August of 1765, was

¹William T. Baxter, The House of Hancock Business in Boston 1724-1775 (New York: Russell and Russell Inc., 1965), p. 308.

²A. E. Brown, John Hancock: His Book (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1898), p. 119.

to seek election for the seat held by Oxenbridge Thatcher, who had been a member of the Massachusetts House of Representatives until his death in July of 1765. This effort was not an overwhelming success as Hancock placed fourth in the balloting. He was not discouraged however, and became increasingly active in the Liberty party.³

Hancock's first successful political adventure took place in May of 1766 when he was elected a representative to the House of Representatives from the Boston area.⁴ The added responsibilities of being a representative as well as maintaining his business interests, placed additional burdens upon him. In 1767, he was re-elected to the General Court in a convincing manner, polling forty-four more votes, 618 to 574, than did Sam Adams.⁵ His service in the General Court was so satisfactory that he was again elected to membership in 1768.⁶

Later in the same year, Hancock was to become involved in the first overt act which brought about the first clash of

³Frederick Wagner, Patriot's Choice the Story of John Hancock (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1964), p. 61.

⁴Elbert Hubbard, Little Journeys to the Homes of American Statesmen. (New York: G. E. Putnam's Sons, 1898), p. 92.

⁵Wagner, Patriot's Choice, p. 71.

⁶Brown, John Hancock: His Book, p. 153.

great importance with the British government. The removal of Owen Richards from the ship Lydia, was the first act of physical opposition to the British officers by a respectable citizen.⁷ The British took possession of the Lydia by force since the British had a ship of the line, the Liberty, anchored in Boston Harbor. This incident only served to stimulate the growing radical sentiments of John Hancock.⁸ On the British side, reaction over the Liberty affair caused British troops to be sent to Boston which marked the first step on the part of England to use arms in America to enforce her authority.⁹ Hancock was defended in the case by John Adams and this strengthened their long friendship.

In May of 1769, Governor Barnard called for another meeting of the General Court to discuss the question of the British troops in Boston and again Hancock was elected as a representative from Boston. Because he was still disturbed from the events of 1768, he worked diligently for the withdrawal of British troops from Massachusetts and, although it was a threat to his business, he supported the non-importation movement in Massachusetts.

⁷Baxter, House of Hancock, p. 261.

⁸Lorenzo Sears, John Hancock, The Picturesque Patriot (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1912), p. 110.

⁹Hubbard, Little Journeys, p. 170.

Hancock's political star continued to rise. On April 18, 1770, he was chosen Speaker of the House pro tempore, but Hutchinson, who had replaced Barnard as governor, and was bitterly opposed to Hancock, vetoed the selection.¹⁰ This was a bitter blow to Hancock and turned his position from that of disagreement with British policies to hatred for England and English rule. Perhaps it was for this reason that he withdrew from public life for a period of three years. Even though he no longer was involved in politics, he did not remain aloof from the eyes of the public.

The Boston Massacre of 1770 caused a great uproar among the people of Boston and again they looked to John Hancock as their leader and spokesman. The day following the massacre he was appointed chairman of a committee of fifteen which was to demand the removal of British troops from Boston. His next honor was to be speaker at a service commemorating the slayings. His eloquent speech in which he denounced the British proved to be popular with the people. Many people, some opponents to Hancock, said that he did not write his Boston Massacre address but this cannot be proven since no one knew Hancock's style of writing.¹¹ In 1771, he

¹⁰Wagner, Patriot's Choice, p. 90.

¹¹James Tuslow Adams, Portrait of an Empty Barrel (New York: Harpers, September 1930), CLXI, p. 428.

was caught smuggling a cargo of wine.¹² Vowing that he would never drink tax-polluted stuff, he ordered that the British agents be thrown into the Boston Harbor.

There was much unrest in the colonies in 1773 as a result of the passage of the Tea Act. Hancock made his re-entry into public life at this time, by presiding over a meeting prior to the Boston Tea Party to protest the landing of tea.¹³ Along with Sam Adams, Paul Revere and Joseph Warren, Hancock helped to organize the Boston Tea Party.¹⁴ Merchants like Hancock, who had been importing and paying the duty on tea, now strenuously opposed the Tea Act, and their opposition, in conjunction with the activities of the radical politicians, led directly to the break with Great Britain.¹⁵

He continued to remain active in the revolutionary movement by serving on a Committee of Correspondence with the two Adams' and Thomas Cushing. They had begun their work in

¹²Richard B. Morris, The Life History of the United States, The Making of a Nation (New York: Time Incorporated, 1963), II, p. 163.

¹³Edwin Wiley and Irving E. Rines, The United States Its Beginnings, Progress and Modern Development (Washington D. C.: American Education Alliance, 1912), I, p. 163.

¹⁴Henry S. Commager and Richard B. Morris, The Spirit of Seventy-Six (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1958), I, p. 1.

¹⁵Harold V. Faulkner, American Economic History (Seventh Edition, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954), p. 115.

the fall of 1773 and were influential in holding the colonies together by an active correspondence with the colonies to the southward.

Another giant stride up the political ladder was taken in the fall of 1774 when the patriot was elected chairman of the Provincial Congress.¹⁶ He was also assigned the task of being chairman of the committee of safety. To be chairman of such a committee was of great importance, for with the position of leader he had the power to call out the militia. Surely the people were convinced of his leadership abilities to trust him with such an important military position. Perhaps the assigning of such an important position to Hancock supports the theory that he was the most capable person to keep the revolutionary movement going in Massachusetts and therefore was not assigned as a delegate to the first Continental Congress.

A second Provincial Congress was called and Hancock was chosen as the President of this body. The Council adjourned on December 10, but prior to the adjournment he was selected as a delegate to the Second Continental Congress. Ironically, he was selected to replace Bowdoin as a delegate to the Congress. The meeting of the Provincial Congress

¹⁶John G. Palfrey, History of New England (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1890), II, p. 543.

marked the end of British authority in Massachusetts.¹⁷

The highest political honor that anyone could receive at that time was to be selected as a delegate to the Continental Congress. Among the delegates were many men of talent and repute and the name of Hancock was among them.¹⁸ He was selected to take the place of Payton Randolph as President of the Congress, a position of great honor. This was also a show of defiance to Britain since Hancock was disliked by the British.¹⁹ It was his ability as a leader, however, that was the major factor in his selection as President. His ability as a presiding officer had been detected in the Boston town-meetings, and in this position he merited a great deal of credit.²⁰

Hancock must have done an outstanding job as President for he was chosen again even though he was absent from the Congress.²¹ It was during this session that he was to become

¹⁷Wiley and Rines, The United States Beginnings, p. 329.

¹⁸John Richard Alden, The American Revolution 1775-1783 (First Edition, New York: Harpers, 1954), p. 28.

¹⁹Claude VanTyne and A. B. Hart, (ed.), The American Nation, A History (New York: Harpers and Brother, 1905), IX, p. 39.

²⁰Brown, John Hancock: His Book, p. 201.

²¹Charles R. King, (ed.), Life and Correspondence of Rufus King (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1894), I, p. 115.

estranged from his former companions John and Sam Adams and he began to associate himself with the aristocratic members from the middle and southern colonies. His private worries and the pressure of the duties of his office had caused him to become ill. It was illness and his disapproval of some of the political extremes that Sam Adams had shown that caused him to break from the Massachusetts delegation.²² At the termination of his services as President, the Congress wanted to thank Hancock formally for his services but the measure was defeated by the New England delegates. Apparently however, the other members of the Congress were well satisfied with the job he had done. While at the Congress, John Adams had the following notions about Hancock: "his executions, sacrifices and general merits in the cause of his country had been incomparably greater than those of colonel Washington".²³

After resigning as President of the Continental Congress, Hancock went back to Massachusetts to win political support with his eye on the governorship. He became the most popular man in the state. With his splendid record as a patriot to support his candidacy, he was elected the governor

²²Wagner, Patriot's Choice, p. 93.

²³Charles Frances Adams, (ed.), The Works of John Adams (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1850-1856), II, p. 415-418.

of the state on September 4, 1780; "a gentleman who deserved well of the people for his sacrifices on their behalf, and who had already respectably filled a number of responsible stations."²⁴ The victory was overwhelming, for with seventeen candidates running for the office, Hancock polled 11,000 of the 12,281 votes cast. He was to hold this office for many years to come, during which time he also reconciled his differences with Sam Adams.

Hancock, Warren, and Sam Adams were considered the big three of the Massachusetts patriots.²⁵ Along with Sam Adams, he was considered one of the leaders of the Whigs who was fearless in his speech and who had aroused the Americans by his patriotic appeals.²⁶ He was a shrewd politician, skilled in ingratiating himself with the Boston voters. He was the most powerful political leader on the continent.²⁷

The character of John Hancock has been attacked and praised by the same people, as fitted the occasion, however, the writings and his conduct showed he was not selfish

²⁴J. S. Barry, History of Massachusetts (Boston: Henry Barry, 1857), III, p. 130.

²⁵John Fiske, The American Revolution (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1891), I, p. 107.

²⁶Allan Nevins, The American States (New York: McMillan Company, 1927), p. 208.

²⁷H. S. Allan, John Hancock Patriot in Purple (New York: McMillan Company, 1948), p. 300.

patriotically.²⁸ Hancock has been called one of the bright stars of our patriot constellation.²⁹ If Hancock was a political nothing, if he contributed nothing to the revolutionary cause, if he was not a patriot of the highest order, as Laco seems to indicate, why was he called an "ugly desperado" by the British and why were they so intent upon his arrest? To the contrary, he was an outstanding politician and contributed greatly to the revolutionary cause. His defiance of the British and support for the American cause made him an enemy of the British. If he were such a poor politician, why was he re-elected as Governor of Massachusetts for ten terms? Certainly the Americans of the past had as much ability as Americans of the present, to cast an intelligent vote at the polls. A poor politician would not be re-elected ten times today. Neither would a poor politician have been re-elected in the past. The record speaks for itself. Hancock was re-elected ten times.

²⁸Wagner, Patriot's Choice, p. 83.

²⁹James Schouler, Americans of 1776 (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1906), p. 220.

CHAPTER V

THE UNSUNG HERO

In a third Laco letter, Higginson charged that Hancock was a poor military man as well as a questionable patriot. His sole basis for this claim was Hancock's participation in the Rhode Island Campaign. The Rhode Island expedition was a combined attempt of French and American forces to dislodge the British forces from Newport. The expedition ended in failure due to a series of unforeseen disasters.

Higginson blamed the failure of the Rhode Island expedition on the retreat of the Massachusetts forces, a retreat that could have been avoided, according to Higginson, if Hancock had remained in the camp instead of returning to Boston. It was most unfair of Higginson to make such an accusation since Hancock did more to unite the French and the Americans as a result of the fiasco of Rhode Island, than is credited to him.

It must be conceded, at this point, that Hancock was never cut out to be a military leader. At the beginning of hostilities he was a colonel in the Boston militia, but without active military experience. He had been rejected by Washington for a position in the American forces, possibly

because of his record of poor health.¹ Hancock had visions of being a great military leader and was most disappointed when Washington was selected as the commander of the American forces. There have been many accounts of Hancock's reaction to the selection of Washington. Meigs described his reaction in this manner: "The face of Hancock underwent transformation. The smile vanished; confusion and bewilderment took its place."² "Mr. Hancock heard me with visible pleasure" said Sam Adams, "but when I came to describe Washington for the commander, I never remarked a more sudden and striking change of countenance. Mortification and resentment were expressed as forcibly as his face could exhibit them."³ Frederick Wagner's assessment is in much the same tenor, "but it seems more likely that his resentment--if he was resentful--was caused by the guile and secrecy with which John and Sam Adams had acted. Hancock never gave either man his wholehearted trust again."⁴ Hancock has been cast in a poor light as a

¹L. H. Butterfield, The Adams Papers (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1961), III, pp. 321 and 322.

²Cornelia Meigs, The Violent Men: A Study of the Human Relations in the First American Congress (New York: The McMillan Company, 1949), p. 115.

³James K. Hosmer, Samuel Adams (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1885), VIII, p. 336.

⁴Frederick Wagner, Patriot's Choice The Story of John Hancock (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1964), p. 132.

result of that incident.

However, at best, only assumptions can be made concerning Hancock's reactions. One cannot overlook the possibility that the account of the incident was highly exaggerated. "In view of Hancock's generosity to both the Adams', it is possible that the younger cousin, suffering from a guilty conscience at having maneuvered behind Hancock's back, imagined--or exaggerated--his reaction."⁵

Higginson placed much of the blame for the failure of the Rhode Island campaign on Hancock and verbally lashed him for actions unbecoming a patriot. Little credit is given to Hancock for smoothing over what could have developed into a major incident and have caused a split between the American and French commands. An examination of the ill fated expedition will show that Hancock had a minor role in the campaign itself, but a major part in the aftermath that followed.

At the end of the year 1776, the only areas not under American control were New York City and Newport, Rhode Island. Newport had been in American possession but had been seized by the British in the preceding autumn.⁶

⁵Ibid., p. 132.

⁶Edward Channing, History of the United States (New York: MacMillan Company, 1928), p. 236.

It was the intention of the American commanders, with the assistance of the French, to retake Newport. General Sullivan was to be in command of the land forces with Generals Green and Lafayette to assist in the operation. In addition to the ground forces, Sullivan was to be aided by the French fleet under the command of D'Estaing.⁷

Newport was held by British forces under the command of General Pigott. Had the Americans launched the campaign early in the year as planned, they could possibly have been successful, however, the attack was postponed until August. This delay allowed Pigott time to bring the northern division back to Newport.⁸ General Howe also sailed from New York with troops to strengthen the British positions at Newport.

The French Fleet also boarded troops and sailed to meet Howe. At this point a storm arose inflicting damages on both the French and the British fleets. Both sides were forced to forsake the original plans and retreat in order to make badly needed repairs, the French going to Boston and the British returning to New York.⁹

The repairs caused a ten-day delay in the American

⁷Ibid., p. 299.

⁸Lorenzo Sears, John Hancock, The Picturesque Patriot (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1912), p. 251.

⁹Ibid., p. 251

plans and allowed the British time to strengthen their position at Newport with additional troops. Four thousand troops under the command of General Clinton arrived at Newport during this period.¹⁰ The Americans who had already crossed into Rhode Island, were now placed in the difficult situation of attempting to take Newport from a highly strengthened British force. The American forces were further hindered when many of the men from Massachusetts pulled out and returned home.

Higginson blamed the sudden departure of the Massachusetts contingency on Hancock. Higginson contended that if Hancock had any patriotism he should have shown it at this time preventing the withdrawal of the troops. He failed to mention two factors which would have made it difficult, at best, for Hancock to perform this feat. First, Sullivan and Green had already agreed on retreat since the British position was much stronger than had been expected and the much needed French help was not forthcoming.¹¹ Second, the troops from Massachusetts had enlisted for fifteen days only, since the original plans called for the taking of a then-weakened British position.¹² Due to the unforeseen series of

¹⁰Ibid., 252.

¹¹Ibid., 258.

¹²Ibid., 252.

events, it became apparent that after fifteen days, this was not going to be accomplished against the now greatly strengthened British forces. Realizing that retreat was eminent, they retreated and returned home.

Hancock could do little on the field as far as breaking camp was concerned, therefore, he also left for Boston, hoping to arrive in time to patch the torn American-French relations. Hancock knew enough about the Bostonians to be apprehensive of the reception that the French troops might get once the news of the action at Newport reached Boston. The French and the Americans had become ill at ease with each other, and the disturbances had broken out in Rhode Island between the two forces and Hancock feared a recurrence once the American troops had returned to Boston.

Upon arriving in Boston, Hancock immediately set out to bind the wounds incurred by both parties. Both the American and French leaders were invited to dine at the Hancock mansion. Hancock, through his understanding of the situation and his diplomacy, was able to restore cordial relations with the French. This act alone far surpassed anything that Hancock could have done at Newport. His actions were the actions of a patriot for he was able to avert a severing of relations that could have resulted in the loss of the French as an ally.

CHAPTER VI

A VICTIM OF THE TIMES

The war years and the post war depression that followed were times in which the Americans were hard pressed financially.¹ Perhaps, since his own fortune was dwindling, this provides an explanation for Higginson's verbal attacks on Hancock for mismanagement of funds, both federal and state while in office. He charged that Hancock's inability as a leader, while president of the Congress and while Governor of Massachusetts, caused the financial problems of the nation and the state. He maintained that the state of Massachusetts was on a sound financial basis before Hancock had become governor, but had descended to a very low ebb by 1789. Was Hancock to blame for the economic problems as Higginson indicates in his articles? I think not. Rather he was a victim of the problems that beset every state during those times.

The major problem that came with the war was the providing of the funds necessary for such a large undertaking. When the war broke out the states had no military supplies and no money with which to purchase them. Under the British,

¹Malone Dumas, (ed.), Dictionary of American Biography (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), IX, p. 16.

the colonists had enjoyed a monetary system based on a sound value of the pound. When war came, this was, of course, lost to the Americans. The Congress was faced with three basic choices: emit paper currency; tax; or borrow. They decided to use all three means.

Paper currency was not new to the colonists and had been used in Massachusetts as early as 1690, and so it was a natural choice to use paper money as a method of providing necessary funds to meet the war effort.² In 1775, the Continental Congress authorized the issuing of two million dollars worth of paper currency which was to be redeemable, at a later date, in Spanish dollars. By November 29, 1779, an additional forty-two emissions had been made totaling almost two and one-half million dollars. Exact figures vary on the total value of the forty-two additional emissions. Oscar Barck and Hugh T. Leffler state there were slightly more than two hundred forty million dollars.³ The exact figure given by Ernest Bogart and Donald Kemmerer was 241,552,780 dollars.⁴

²L. M. Hacker, Triumph of American Capitalism (Columbia, n. p., 1940), p. 9.

³Oscar Theodore Barck Jr. and Hugh Talmage Lefler, Colonial America (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1958), p. 664.

⁴Ernest L. Bogart and Donald L. Kemmerer, Economic History of the American People (Second Edition, New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1947), p. 178.

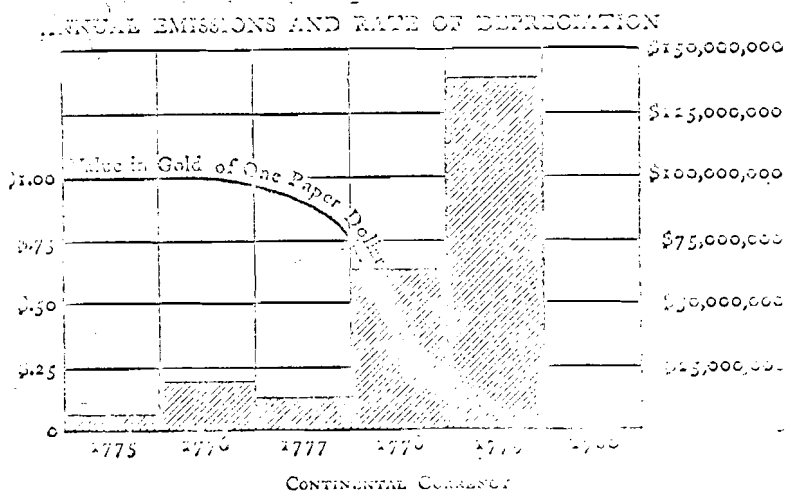
Harold Faulkner gave a figure of 191,552,380 dollars.⁵

With so many emissions being made by the Congress, the value of this currency dropped rapidly after independence was declared and by 1780 was, for all practical purposes, worthless. "Buoyed up by the French and Spanish subsidies, the dollar held up fairly well until September, 1777, when it began to depreciate rapidly; in March, 1780, the Continental dollar sold for 2.45 cents, a value it held until the end of the war."⁶ It must be pointed out that at the time Hancock yielded the chair as President of the Continental Congress, the value of the Continental dollar was still fairly high, having a value of approximately seventy-five cents. The greatest drop in the value of the dollar took place in the years after Hancock stepped down as President of the Congress. The diagram on the following page illustrates the drop in the dollar value.⁷ If Hancock was as incompetent as Higginson attempts to persuade the voters of that time to believe, why did the dollar drop so rapidly after his departure and not before?

At the same time that the Congress was issuing paper notes, most of the states had begun to do the same. By 1783,

⁵H. A. Faulkner, American Economic History (Seventh Edition, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954), p. 138.

⁶Ibid., p. 138.



⁷Bogart and Kemmerer, Economic History of the American People, p. 177.

eleven of the thirteen states had issued paper currency amounting to 246,366,941 dollars.⁸ Like the federal monies that were in circulation, the state notes depreciated, but at a more rapid pace than did the continental paper. Consequently, the state of Massachusetts, like many of the other states, was in a poor financial condition when Hancock became governor. Higginson blamed Hancock for failing to improve the situation. Bowdoin, Higginson's choice for the governor's chair, had an opportunity to make financial decisions but failed to act. Under the conditions, I believe that Hancock did an outstanding job of keeping Massachusetts from bankruptcy during his years in office.

When Hancock began his first term in 1780, the British were winning the war and there was wide-spread inflation in Massachusetts. In Boston, beef was selling for eight dollars per pound, sugar for ten and butter for twelve dollars per pound with ten Massachusetts paper dollars being worth one cent in hard money.⁹ The continuing depreciation hastened the already poor conditions. Faulkner declares that "In 1781 it took one hundred dollars in paper money to purchase a bushel of corn, ninety dollars for a pound of tea, one

⁸Faulkner, American Economic History, p. 138.

⁹H. S. Allan, John Hancock Patriot in Purple (New York: MacMillan Company, 1948), p. 300.

thousand five hundred and seventy-five dollars for a barrel of flour."¹⁰ Shoes rose to twenty dollars per pair and other items increased in equal proportions. Sam Adams purchased a suit during this period for a reported \$2,000. Such were the conditions during the war.¹¹

It was Hancock's misfortune also to be in the governor's chair during most of the post war depression. The depression was caused by several factors; the loss of wartime contracts which closed many of the new American industrial factories; the loss of profits derived from privateering; the loss of prewar markets; and the depreciation of the paper currency.

The loss of wartime contracts severely hurt the New England states and especially Massachusetts. During the war the economy of the country had changed from an agricultural base to one of manufacturing. American industry because of the non-importation, was left to its own resources to meet the supply of clothing and munitions needed for the war effort. Upon the conclusion of the war, the large market ceased to exist as cheaper manufactured goods were imported from Europe once again, and combined with the poor conditions of the American currency, the manufacturing concerns in the

¹⁰Faulkner, American Economic History, p. 138.

¹¹Allan, John Hancock Patriot in Purple, p. 138.

states could not compete.

Privateering became exceedingly profitable during the war. Formally commissioned by Congress in March of 1776, these privateers worked in the areas of the West Indies and the Irish Sea and English Channels.¹² They brought many valuable prizes to their owners and hampered much of the British shipping. After the war, there was no longer a need for the bandits of the sea and they disappeared as quickly as they had come into existence.

With the ending of the war came the necessity of finding new markets for American goods. Because of the Navigation Acts, all trade between the West Indies and the United States was to be carried in English ships. The Prohibitory Act of 1775 was repealed by the British, which allowed trade once again between the two countries. This left the British in a position whereby they could dictate the terms of trade, which they did throughout the Confederation period. The Americans were anxious to receive British goods and imported heavily while exports to England declined during this period. The Americans were forced to seek ports in other countries. Much time was required in order to build a relationship with these countries that proved profitable for the United States. Trade with France did not provide a great source of income

¹²Barck and Lefler, Colonial America, p. 613.

but did show a profit. Barck and Lefler stated "As for exchange with France, the United States also sold more than it bought; the average annual sales between 1783 and 1789 amounted to 9,000,000 livres; purchases averaged but 2,000,000."¹³

Holland also provided a rich source of income to the new country. However, a very profitable area of trade in the Mediterranean was lost after the Revolution. No longer did the American merchant have the protection of the British navy in this area, and they fell easy prey to the pirates of North Africa.¹⁴ The loss of these valuable markets offset the acquisition of new ones and it took some time to build American trade up to its prewar level, which was not exceptionally good, as has been pointed out earlier.

It was Hancock's misfortune to be in office during the time of overspeculation after the war ended. Credit was easily obtained and Americans bought goods, especially British goods, far beyond their actual needs, hoping for quick disposals and high profits. However, these profits were not to be realized since the value of American money declined so rapidly. Faced with such overwhelming odds

¹³Ibid., p. 695.

¹⁴Bogart and Kemmerer, Economic History of the American People, p. 183.

against him, Hancock did a creditable job of not only guiding the nation but the State of Massachusetts through perilous financial times.

CHAPTER VII

HANCOCK AND THE CONSTITUTION

In January 1788, delegates from all sections of Massachusetts gathered in Boston to consider the proposed National Constitution. Although Hancock was chosen as the presiding officer of the convention, he was severely ill and therefore unable to take part in many of the sessions. Higginson, in a recurring theme throughout his letters, accused Hancock of using illness as an excuse to get himself out of difficult situations. Higginson tried to convince the populus that Hancock did little to support the Constitution and voted for it only after it was clear that the added resolutions would make it pass.

Hancock had suffered attacks of gout throughout his career. These attacks had been growing in intensity until, by the end of 1785, they had become highly painful. As a result, he had become highly nervous, was constantly on the verge of a nervous breakdown, and frequently was confined to bed for days at a time.

"For days on end he was forced to keep to his bed in a darkened room. One attack was so painful that he had to be carried from his carriage to the sofa in the drawing room, where servants cut his clothing off to relieve the pressure on his horribly swollen limbs."¹

¹Frederick Wagner, Patriot's Choice The Story of John Hancock (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1964), p. 159.

Such was the physical state of John Hancock during many of the days during the convention. When he was able to attend, he was wrapped in flannels and had to be carried into the hall by friends. If Hancock had tried to deceive people through illness, why would he have used such a painful ailment as the gout? Apparently the voters of Massachusetts refused to allow themselves to be swayed by Higginson's intimations for, until his death, Hancock was returned to office by larger and larger majorities.

The duty of a presiding officer is to conduct the meeting without attempting to lead the participants in decisions or the making of various policies. Such should have been the case, and was for Hancock during the ratification convention. Hancock had directed his secretary to put the Constitution before the legislature. It was not his duty to decide on the Constitution but the duty of the delegates to make the decisions.² Higginson took exception to that position charging that Hancock should have led the convention from the beginning. At best, it was difficult for Hancock to attend, let alone lead, the convention, yet he did do an honorable service to the convention.

There was a great deal of mixed emotions at the time

²S. B. Harding, The Contest Over the Ratification of the Federal Constitution in the State of Massachusetts (New York: Longmans, Green, and Company), p. 45.

concerning the Constitution. Rufus King believed that there was a very large majority of the people in Massachusetts in favor of the Federal Constitution.³ On the other hand, Frederick Wagner wrote that the Anti-Federalists were stronger in the state than the Federalists.⁴ The eyes of the nation were on the Massachusetts convention and its outcome, and therefore it was considered a key state. "It was supposed that if the Massachusetts convention should ratify, the other States would be greatly influenced to act favorably upon this important question."⁵

At the outset, Hancock was lukewarm to the Constitution and took a middle-of-the-road attitude. With the idea of promoting unity and having a vote in favor of ratification, Hancock made a proposition which was accepted by the Federalists. There had been rumors of possible amendments being added to the Constitution. Hancock suggested, that if amendments were thought necessary, the Massachusetts legislature should define them and send them to Congress and

³Charles R. King, (ed.), Life and Correspondence of Rufus King (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1894), I, p. 329.

⁴Wagner, Patriot's Choice The Story of John Hancock, p. 160.

⁵Edwin Wiley and Irving E. Rines, The United States Its Beginnings, Progress and Modern Development (Washington D. C.: American Educational Alliance, 1912), IV, p. 9.

ratify the Constitution to show the wishes of the state.⁶

A committee was chosen to draw up the amendments which were debated for several days. The proposed amendments included the following: all powers that were not delegated to Congress were to be reserved to the states; there was to be one representative to every thirty-thousand people up to a total of two million; direct taxes were to be used as a last resort for revenue; no commercial monopolies were to be created; there was to be indictment by grand jury for capital offenses and the Supreme Court was to have no jurisdiction of cases between citizens of different states unless they totaled three hundred thousand dollars or more; there were to be jury trials in civil suits if requested; and titles of nobility would not be granted by Congress.⁷ By using these amendments, Hancock saw an opportunity to bring an end to the arguing over the Constitution.⁸

With the addition of the amendments, many men who had been opposed to the Constitution now altered their allegiance and supported the document, among them was Sam Adams. The opponents to the Constitution could possibly have defeated

⁶J. S. Barry, History of Massachusetts (Boston: Henry Barry, 1857), III, p. 297.

⁷Ibid., p. 298-300.

⁸Lorenzo Sears, John Hancock, The Picturesque Patriot (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1912), p. 287.

it if Hancock had not supported the amendments. "They were not altogether of his devising: he did not pose as a statesman; but he had the tact and influence and wisdom to guide a many-minded assembly into the best way out of difficulty and to the saving of the confederacy from practical dissolution."⁹ The result of the vote was very close but the document was ratified by a margin of nineteen votes, the final tally showing one hundred eighty-seven in favor of ratification and one hundred sixty-eight opposed.¹⁰ Many of the recommendations made by the Massachusetts Convention were later ratified by two thirds of the states and included in the Constitution.¹¹

⁹Ibid., p. 286.

¹⁰Andrew Cunningham McLaughlin L. L. B., The Confederation and the Constitution (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1905), I, p. 295.

¹¹Sears, John Hancock, The Picturesque Patriot, p. 286.

CHAPTER VIII

IN RETROSPECT

The "Laco Letters" attempted to discredit Hancock in order to sway public opinion to the side of Bowdoin. The election did not fulfill Higginson's wishes, for Hancock was re-elected by a large majority. Until his death on October 8, 1793, John Hancock continued to be returned to office. This record, I believe, speaks for itself and serves to refute Higginson's charge that Hancock had no political ability. I believe that the voting public of that day had no less ability in choosing between candidates than the voter of today. Would the electorate have returned to office time and time again a man if he had done a poor job or had shown no ability? Hancock's political career has been traced briefly and it has been shown that he was highly regarded by the politicians of his day, both as a politician and a leader, having been selected to preside over the Congress.

Higginson created a verbal picture of Hancock as a complete failure in the business world. As was suggested before, perhaps he did so to create a scapegoat for his own shortcomings. It has been shown that Hancock did not have the opportunity in business that had been the case with his uncle Thomas. Even though Hancock's political activity did not afford him ample time for complete devotion to his

business, he remained solvent and met all of his obligations.

It was conceded that Hancock was not a military leader. Yet, Higginson blamed the failure of the Newport campaign on Hancock's supposed walk-out which led to the retreat of the American forces. It has been shown that the retreat began while Hancock was still present. The Massachusetts contingent had completed their fifteen days' service and knew that their presence was no longer needed. The Newport campaign was undermined by the weather and Hancock could be of no service. He did render the great service of smoothing the ruffled relations between the French and the Americans which could have proved disastrous to the revolutionary movement.

Higginson accused Hancock of leading the state of Massachusetts into financial chaos. It has been shown that Hancock was a victim of the poor financial conditions that beset the country at that time. This economically unhealthy state was not prevalent in Massachusetts alone, but spread throughout the country. Several factors caused the poor business climate. Among them were the highly inflated value of the dollar and the loss of a trading market, which took time to rebuild. These odds were against Hancock when he took office and conditions of the day did not give him much opportunity to improve an already deplorable situation.

Finally, Hancock was severely reprimanded for not

taking a more active part in the Constitutional Convention in Massachusetts. It has been emphasized that Hancock was hampered by poor health, which immobilized him. It was only with a great effort that he was able to attend a few sessions of the convention. He was to preside over the convention, not lead it in any particular direction, and his inability to attend certainly did not afford him much opportunity to coerce the delegates. Had it not been for Hancock's insistence that certain proposals be passed with the Constitution, the chances of it's being defeated would have been very high. Hancock's support provided enough strength to result in passage of the Constitution. The action of the Massachusetts Convention could have led other states to ratify the Constitution faster than had been expected. Because of the results in the states in the days that followed, the Massachusetts Convention, I think that Hancock performed a service of higher and more lasting value than Higginson was willing to recognize.

John Hancock, having been subject to illness throughout most of his life, finally succumbed on October 8, 1793. His body laid in state in Boston where he was given the largest funeral that had been given in the state. He died a patriot and his fame, although tainted by the "Laco Letters", remains the fame of a patriot.

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