

John Webster

Governor of the Colony of Connecticut, 1656

Baptized: August 16, 1590, Cossington, Leicestershire, England

College: None

Political Party: None

Offices: Assistant, General Court of the Colony of Connecticut, 1639-1655

Commissioner to the United Colonies of New England, 1654

Deputy Governor, Colony of Connecticut 1655

Governor, Colony of Connecticut, 1656

Chief Magistrate, Colony of Connecticut, 1657

Magistrate, Hadley, Massachusetts, 1660

Died: April 5, 1661, Hadley, Massachusetts

John Webster was baptized on August 16, 1590 in Cossington, Leicestershire, England. He was the son of Matthew and Elizabeth (Ashton) Webster, a family of some substance. On November 7, 1609, he and Agnes Smith were married at Cossington. An article written by Mrs. S. H. Skillington gives this account of their time in Cossington:

“There is not much evidence of John Webster IV’s life in England. He married, when only nineteen, a girl whose family had lived in Cossington at least as long as his own. She bore him nine children, only two of whom died in infancy. He prepared to leave his homeland in 1634. The deeds show that he then owned in Cossington three houses and a cottage, various small closes, about one hundred acres of arable land, and considerable grazing rights.

So John Webster set out for the New World with a wife still vigorous, six stalwart children, some implements of husbandry, and with more than £1,000 in his possession.” *

John Webster and his family first settled in Watertown, Massachusetts and moved to Hartford in 1636, probably with Thomas Hooker's group, which left Newtown, Massachusetts in April 1636. He was one of the original landholders of Hartford, was a member of the committee that sat with the Court of Magistrates of the Colony of Connecticut in 1637 and 1638, and became an Assistant to the General Court of the Colony of Connecticut in 1639. As an Assistant, he was one of a small group of men who were second in power only to the Governor, Deputy Governor, and General Court of Magistrates. He traveled to towns in Connecticut as a judge, helped

create criminal laws for the colony, settled land and boundary disputes, helped the New England Congress supply Connecticut towns with soldiers and ammunition for an expedition against the Indians, and surveyed the highway from Hartford to Windsor. He was a Commissioner to the United Colonies of New England in 1654.

The Colony of Connecticut elected him as Deputy Governor in 1655, with Thomas Welles as Governor. The next year, 1656, John Webster was elected as Governor. Elections were annual, and prior to 1659 it was believed that no person should serve a term of more than one year. In 1657 John Winthrop was elected as governor, with Thomas Welles as Deputy Governor and John Webster as Chief Magistrate.

John Webster was one of the leading members of the First Congregational Church of Hartford, whose minister, the Rev. Thomas Hooker, was the dynamic leader of the first settlers that came to Hartford. When Hooker died in 1647, a controversy arose as to who should become his successor. The Rev. Samuel Stone, Hooker's assistant, was supported by a majority of the church members. However, Rev. Stone wanted to change some aspects of church procedures, including liberalizing the eligibility requirements for infant baptism and admission to communion, while limiting the autonomy of each congregation. A significant number of the parishioners disagreed with Stone and wanted Michael Wigglesworth as Rev. Hooker's successor. A religious dispute arose, and the congregation became split. Church and state were not separate at that time, so this became a political as well as a spiritual crisis for Hartford.

The dissenting group, of which John Webster was a prominent member, wanted to withdraw from the Hartford church and move to Massachusetts, but Rev. Stone and his followers would not release them from their church covenant. The dissenters attempted to get other Congregational Churches in nearby towns to accept them, but none would. The principles disputed in Hartford were introduced in the General Assembly as the Half-Way Covenant in August 1657 and became points of conflict for Congregational Churches throughout New England for over a decade. A key provision allowed Congregational churches to baptize children of parents who had themselves been baptized but who had never professed conversion and had consequently never been fully admitted to the Church. The Half-Way Covenant was approved by a New England church synod in 1662 and finally passed by the Connecticut legislature in May 1669. On February 12, 1669/70 some members of the First Church of Hartford left to form the Second Church.

Meanwhile, on April 18, 1659, through the arbitration of some Massachusetts Congregational Church leaders, many of the initial dissenters and Rev. Stone's faction signed an agreement for the former group to move to Massachusetts. The Hadley Company, as it was known, left Hartford shortly after that, with John Webster as one of its leaders. He was given the responsibility of laying out the roads for the company. He and his family went first to Northhampton, Massachusetts, and later to Hadley, where he was made a magistrate in May 1660. He died there, of a fever, on April 5, 1661 and is buried in Hadley. His wife Agnes died in Hartford in 1667. His most famous descendant was Noah Webster, who was born in Hartford in 1758 and who died May 28, 1843 in New Haven.

John Webster's home lot in Hartford, Connecticut was on the east side of what became Governor Street (the present Popieluszko Court).

*Skillington, S.H. "The Ancestry of John Webster." *The American Genealogist*.

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Webster, Wayne Hilton. *The Indomitable Spirits: A Webster Family Anthology*. n.p., 1995 [CSL call number CS 71 .W38 1995].

Portrait

There is no portrait of Governor John Webster.

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