

## Samuel Huntington

### Governor of Connecticut, 1786-1796

**Born:** July 5, 1731 (old calendar) or July 16, 1731 (new calendar), Scotland Parish, Windham, Connecticut

**College:** None

**Political Party:** No declared political party

**Offices:**

Justice of the Peace, Norwich, 1765-1774

Represented Norwich, Connecticut General Assembly, May session, 1765

King's Attorney, 1765-1773

Assistant Judge, Connecticut Superior Court, 1773-1784

Upper House, General Assembly, 1775-1783

Council of Safety, 1775-1776

Delegate to Continental Congress, 1776, 1778-1781, 1783

Signer, Declaration of Independence, 1776

Signer, Articles of Confederation, 1778

President, Continental Congress, 1779-1781

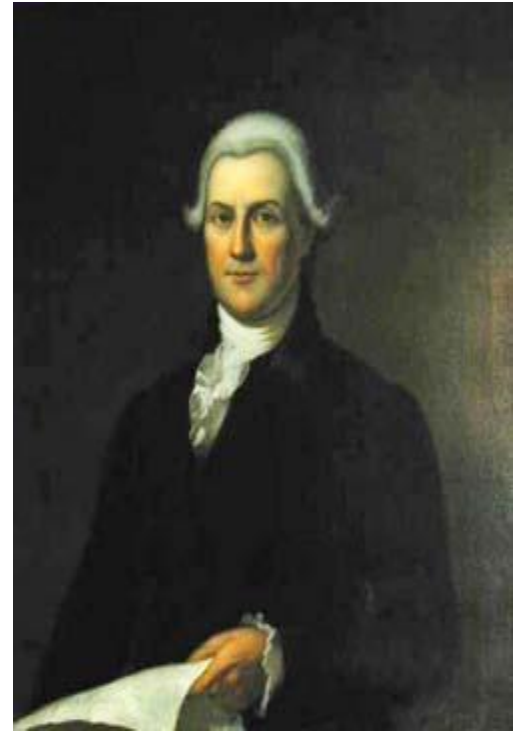
President of the United States of America in Congress Assembled, 1781

Lieutenant Governor, State of Connecticut, 1784-1786

Chief Judge, Connecticut Superior Court, 1784-1785

Governor, State of Connecticut, 1786-1796

**Died:** January 5, 1796, Norwich, Connecticut



Samuel Huntington was born in Scotland Parish (now the Town of Scotland) in what was then the Town of Windham, Connecticut. His birth date is smudged in the town records and has been variously reported as July 3 and July 5, 1731, but the mystery was solved during a recent refurbishment of the tomb in Old Norwichtown Cemetery where he and his wife Martha are buried. There is a plate on his coffin that reads, "...born July 16<sup>th</sup> AD 1731." It appears that Samuel, like many others in that period, added eleven days to his birth date to make up for a change in the calendar that eliminated eleven days from the month of September 1752. Therefore, he celebrated the anniversary of his birth on July 16, and his date of record must have been July 5.

Samuel's father, Nathaniel Huntington, son of one of the founders of the town of Windham, settled along the banks of Merrick's Brook near the center of what is now the town of Scotland. There he and his wife, Mehetabel (Thurston) Huntington, raised their large family and played an active role in the community. Nathaniel was not wealthy, but ran a substantial farm, owning other land in the town and possibly supplementing his income by working at times as a clothier. He was among those who petitioned for permission to settle a minister in that part of town, hosted and chaired the initial meetings of the society and donated a piece of land near his home as the site for a meetinghouse. Eldest son Nathaniel, as befitting the status of eldest son, was sent to Yale College, and became a Congregational minister in Ellington.

Second son Samuel watched several of his brothers attend college while he worked on the farm. Some sources state that he was apprenticed to a cooper, completing his apprenticeship willingly but without enthusiasm. He was much more inclined to studies and would probably

have been happier going to Yale himself. He began studying in his spare time with the encouragement of the Reverend Ebenezer Devotion, the family minister who lived nearby. Visits to the parson's library may also have served as visits to Rev. Devotion's daughter Martha, since Samuel married her as soon as he had established himself with a home and steady income.

Samuel expanded his reading, concentrating on law, perhaps using books borrowed from two Windham lawyers, Eliphalet Dyer and Jedediah Elderkin. On December 2, 1754, he was admitted to the bar in Windham, and by 1760 he had moved to the larger town of Norwich, where there was ample work for the young lawyer. In 1761, he married Martha Devotion, and they settled into the Norwich community, where they had numerous influential relatives to help them along, including Lathrops, Huntingtons and other prominent families. Samuel handled a variety of cases and soon earned a solid reputation. Often he represented the town in county court, and his practice increased to include several out-of-state clients regarding business in Connecticut. Records of his early career are scanty, but in a surprisingly short time Norwich was asking Samuel to represent them at the General Assembly. The same year, 1765, he was appointed by the General Assembly for the first of nine years as a justice of the peace in Norwich and also became a Norwich selectman. About the same time he was appointed a King's Attorney, and he held this position for several years until resigning after being named to the Superior Court. This was a County Court appointment, roughly equivalent to a State's Attorney today.

In less than a decade, Samuel was receiving notice on a larger scale. The General Assembly appointed him an Assistant Judge of the Superior Court in 1773 and continued him in the position until 1784, when he was appointed to the Supreme Court of Errors. Although personal information about Huntington is limited, he was apparently ambitious but not arrogant, skillful but not polished. Well-connected, and with an ability to diplomatically get things done by persuasion or compromise, he gained the approval of freemen as well as of the "Standing Order" of elite who governed the colony. Support also came from the backers of the Susquehannah Company, to whose claims on Pennsylvania lands he was sympathetic.

Although by nature diplomatic, and probably hoping at first that things could be worked out with the mother country, Samuel shared the colony's growing frustration with the taxes and restrictions coming from Parliament. A well-attended Norwich meeting in June 1774 chose a committee of nine men to draw up a resolution regarding "this Alarming Crisis of affairs Relative to the Natural Rights and Priviledges of the People." Samuel Huntington's name came first on the list, and the resulting resolution, passed almost unanimously, pledged that Norwich inhabitants would defend the "Liberties and Immunities of British America" and would cooperate with the other colonies in doing so. Samuel was not named a member of the Committee of Correspondence established at that meeting, nor a later Committee of Inspection, but on May 8, 1775, he moderated a meeting that instructed the Selectmen and Committee of Inspection to take care that no one "inimical to the Common Cause of America" be allowed to settle in town. Huntington was not a radical, but it is clear where his sentiments lay. Three days later, again representing Norwich at Hartford, he was elected to the Upper House of the General Assembly. Later in that session he was named to the Council of Safety and in October was chosen as one of Connecticut's delegates to the Continental Congress, to begin serving in January 1776. That year in Philadelphia, he would begin his national service, forming relationships with well-known delegates from other colonies and signing the Declaration of Independence.

By this time, Samuel was quite prosperous and had begun to accumulate real estate in Windham and Norwich. He had close ties to the two towns and also to family. Although active

in the Congregational Church in Norwich near his home, he did not transfer his membership from Scotland Church until the death of his father-in law, Rev. Devotion. Samuel and Martha had no children of their own but did not have an empty household. Martha's sister Hannah had married Samuel's brother, the Reverend Joseph Huntington. When Hannah died in 1771, two of their three children came from their home in Coventry to live in the Huntington household in Norwich. Nephew Samuel and his sister Fanny were raised by Martha and Samuel, and Fanny stayed with Samuel until his death. The household had a reputation for youthful gatherings and plenty of music, and Samuel was apparently quite close to this gathered family, which eventually also included Martha's young step-brother Mason Cogswell after his mother, too, had died. When Samuel was asked to represent Connecticut at the Continental Congress, and then found it difficult to get back permanently to Connecticut, it was apparently distressing for him to be away for such a long time. He commented often on wishing he could go home.

With Oliver Wolcott, Huntington made a difficult journey of about two weeks in January 1776 to begin service in the Continental Congress. They arrived in Philadelphia on January 15, but Huntington soon was struggling with smallpox and was not able to carry on with his duties until late February. In constant correspondence with individuals and government back home, Connecticut's delegates Huntington, Wolcott, and Sherman received word of the General Assembly's June vote authorizing them to join other colonies in declaring independence. Thus, diplomatic Samuel Huntington, who had never been prominent among the radical element agitating for breaking away from the Britain, voted for and signed the Declaration of Independence.

Aside from brief visits home in April and June, Huntington was in Philadelphia ten long months of 1776. Long days in Congress, a heavy load of committee assignments, dislike of the city, slow and inadequate reimbursement for his living expenses, and worry about family and business at home left him anxious to be done. Arriving in Norwich in November, he immediately was caught up in the war effort at home as the Council of Safety and General Assembly grappled with the problems of provisions, prices, raising militia, and protecting the coast. Although again elected a delegate for 1777, there was work to be done in Connecticut, and Huntington stayed close to home. In July 1777, Huntington and other representatives of New England states and New York met in Springfield to discuss economic problems brought on by the war, such as high prices, inflation, and unstable paper money.

February 1778 found Samuel Huntington heading back to Pennsylvania with an appreciation of the effects of the war on the state level and in communities like Norwich. In his absence, Congress had written Articles of Confederation, but they were far from perfect, and states were slow to ratify. Huntington saw the need for some form of unified government and supported passage. After signing this new constitution, the Articles of Confederation, for Connecticut, Samuel headed for home in July on a leave of absence. Again elected congressman in the fall of 1778, he reported to Philadelphia the next May. This session involved even more committee appointments and more visibility, especially on three major committees – the Marine Committee, a committee assigned to prepare instructions for negotiating a peace with Great Britain, and another to plan for one or more supreme courts of appeal. He was greatly concerned with military pay issues and problems with currency.

On September 9, 1779, Huntington requested leave to again return to Connecticut, but before he could leave, he was elected President of the Continental Congress to replace John Jay, who had been appointed minister to Spain. By this time, Huntington had considerable experience and seniority and was known to not let regional biases control his stand on national issues, making him an acceptable choice for competing regions. The presidency did not involve a great

deal of prestige or direct power, but the quality of leadership could help determine whether factions could agree and business could be accomplished. Huntington had already impressed fellow delegate Benjamin Rush as “a sensible, candid and worthy man, and wholly free from State prejudices.”

When it became apparent that he would need to stay in Philadelphia for a year of the presidency, after already having been away since May, Samuel sent for Martha, who arrived late in December. Like Samuel, she endured a bout of smallpox almost immediately upon arrival. Congress provided an expensive home, food and household supplies, and a staff. In spite of living more frugally than his predecessors, Huntington found the position a financial hardship. The presidency carried no additional salary, but he was expected to entertain other members of Congress and foreign dignitaries, while his own business interests in Connecticut were languishing. The Connecticut treasury forwarded him funds to help, but not enough to cover his expenses.

Huntington’s diplomatic skills were put to the test presiding over a sometimes contentious Congress. He spent long hours in correspondence with military and governmental officials in states and abroad, and in composing official documents. Although no longer expected to do committee work, he was still an active delegate from Connecticut, necessitating further correspondence with Governor Jonathan Trumbull and others back in Connecticut. He dealt with absenteeism, irregular mail service, and constant worries about progress of the war and the economy. Pressing the states to provide their quota of much-needed men and supplies was difficult without a means of enforcement or a stable currency. Huntington kept up correspondence with Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, John Jay, and others as they worked on diplomatic missions in Europe, and personally made friends with the French minister.

Although Huntington expected his term to expire in September 1780, Congress voted to keep him for another term. With the ratification vote of Maryland, the last hold-out state, the Articles of Confederation became the official constitution on March 1, 1781. The United States became a nation, and Samuel Huntington became the first President of “The United States in Congress Assembled.”

In July 1781, Samuel resigned the Presidency and returned to Connecticut, hoping to stay. Business matters back home had been neglected too long, and his judgeship and seat on the Governor’s Council had been held open for him. His homecoming itself was probably not as comforting as he had hoped. He arrived July 25, 1781, perhaps in poor health. On September 6, Norwich native Benedict Arnold and the British brought the war to southeastern Connecticut, attacking and burning nearby New London, then overwhelming Fort Griswold on the opposite shore of the river. Undoubtedly friends and acquaintances of the Huntington family were among those killed or affected, and Norwich was just upriver of the attacks. A month later, his mother Mehetable died at home in Scotland.

Resuming his role in the General Assembly that fall, he became active in committee work. Over the next two years he drafted the first copyright law in America and prepared numerous reports. When reelected to Congress in May 1782, he chose not to attend, leaving the representation to others, but when again designated a delegate in 1783, he relented and returned one more time to Congress, meeting this time at Princeton. The war was over, although as yet unofficially, and Congress dealt with military pay problems, choosing a location for the capitol, and a variety of issues involved in the transition from wartime to establishing a new country. Huntington had

served in Congress and as President during some of the most difficult years of the war, and he was again in Congress in October 1783 when word arrived that the Treaty of Paris had been signed.

In November 1783, Huntington finally returned home to stay. He was now a national figure, and in a position to act as liaison with other states and the national government on issues of mutual concern. Samuel was elected Lieutenant Governor in 1784 and 1785. He worked on rebuilding his law practice, and tutored some students in law, including his namesake nephew. During the May 1786 session of the General Assembly, he had again been elected Lieutenant Governor, and had already taken the oath of office, but no candidate for Governor, including incumbent Matthew Griswold, won a majority of the vote of the freemen. As a result, the General Assembly was free to select the Governor. They chose Samuel Huntington.

The Revolution and its aftermath had caused considerable financial stress in the state. Under Huntington's leadership, the General Assembly addressed economic problems by giving strong encouragement to developing industries, especially textiles, through tax exemptions and other financial incentives. In 1786 and 1788, Connecticut established procedures for handling claims by those injured in the Revolution. Land in the Western Reserve, held back when Connecticut surrendered title to most of the western lands claimed under the Charter of 1662, was used to help compensate those who had suffered loss of "homes or other property" to British actions during the war. A sale of the remainder of that reserve was used to establish a permanent school fund for Connecticut. As the economy improved and lingering war-related issues were solved, Connecticut began the transformation into a more modern society. Huntington's tenure as Governor saw the establishment of Connecticut's first banks, incorporation of the Connecticut Medical Society, some state support of the struggling Yale College, and a change to allow individuals to divert their financial support to dissenting churches. Connecticut residents were barred from participating in the slave trade. The decision was made to erect "a large Convenient State House in the Town of Hartford to accommodate the General Assembly," although this building, today known as the "Old State House," was slow in coming and was not dedicated until after Huntington's death.

Samuel Huntington's letters provide little comment on personal events and relationships, apart from the frequent assertion that he'd much rather be home in Connecticut, tending to personal business and spending time with his family. His health was also a cause for concern, and he frequently referred to the strain of his work in Congress. William Strickland, an English visitor touring New England in 1794-5, visited Huntington in the company of Jeremiah Wadsworth. Strickland observed that Huntington was, "a respectable looking man grown gray in the service of his country, of strong sense in conversation, of a countenance sedate, thoughtful and benignant, and of plain unaffected manners."

Huntington's letters and speeches do provide glimpses of the open-minded and diplomatic temperament that kept him in one office or another, often several at a time, for most of his life. He recognized that many issues had more than one legitimate side, and he was anxious to hear all when considering his position or response. As Connecticut considered ratification of the United States Constitution in 1788, he spoke to the convention about the document he had been working hard to promote in the state. "It does not give me pain, but pleasure, to hear the sentiments of those gentlemen who differ from me. It is not to be expected from human nature, that we should all have the same opinion." He spoke of the need for representative government and the need for two branches of legislature "that the one may be a check upon the other." There was a need for a national government of sufficient power "with respect to matters of national concern." Connecticut's representatives had played a great role in creating the

compromise between large and small states that resulted in differing representation – according to population in the House of Representatives, an equal representation of states in the Senate – and the proposal to ratify passed by a large margin.

Connecticut kept Samuel Huntington in the governorship almost a full decade, until he died on January 5, 1796, still in office. Martha had died in 1794, as had his brother Joseph, and Samuel's health declined during 1795. In January 1796, he died of "dropsy of the chest." The main beneficiary of his will was his nephew Samuel, who had followed in his footsteps as a lawyer, and later moved to Ohio, where he held many of the same offices his uncle had in Connecticut, including the governorship.

Huntington's will and inventory show that he had acquired considerable real estate holdings, and he used some of these to provide for certain family members, as well as giving his childhood church land for a parsonage. Newspaper accounts of Governor Huntington's funeral describe a procession of bands and dignitaries from his home to the nearby Norwich church, where his pastor and friend Joseph Strong preached the funeral sermon, characterizing Huntington as "naturally amiable," with a "candid deliberate manner," and describing his close relationship with his family.

Samuel Huntington was well-known and respected in his day. He was awarded honorary degrees by Princeton, Dartmouth and Yale, and counted among his acquaintances George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin, but his fame subsided over the years, and many have never heard of this first "President of the United States in Congress Assembled." Huntington, Connecticut, founded in 1789, was renamed Shelton in 1919, although a section still goes by the name of Huntington. Towns named for Governor Huntington remain in Pennsylvania and Indiana, and a public school in Norwich, Connecticut bears his name.

Samuel's birthplace and childhood home in Scotland is managed by [The Governor Samuel Huntington Trust](#) and is open to the public. His final home in Norwich houses the offices of a nonprofit social service organization.

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### **Portrait**

39" x 46" in its frame, painted by George Wright (1828-1881) and purchased from him by the state. It was copied from a portrait made by Charles Willson Peale in 1783.

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