

Resurrecting Samuel Huntington, the 'first' president



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Scotland's most famous son, Samuel Huntington, was a signer of the Declaration of Independence, president of the Continental Congress from 1779 to 1783, and governor of Connecticut from 1786 to 1796. He was born in the Scotland parish of Windham in 1731.

I obtained a copy of his portrait, which hangs in the Connecticut State Library, and showed it to several acquaintances. No one had the slightest idea who was portrayed in the painting. Huntington does not have the cachet of a Nathan Hale, a Paul Revere or a Benedict Arnold. The Gov. Samuel Huntington Trust aims to change that.

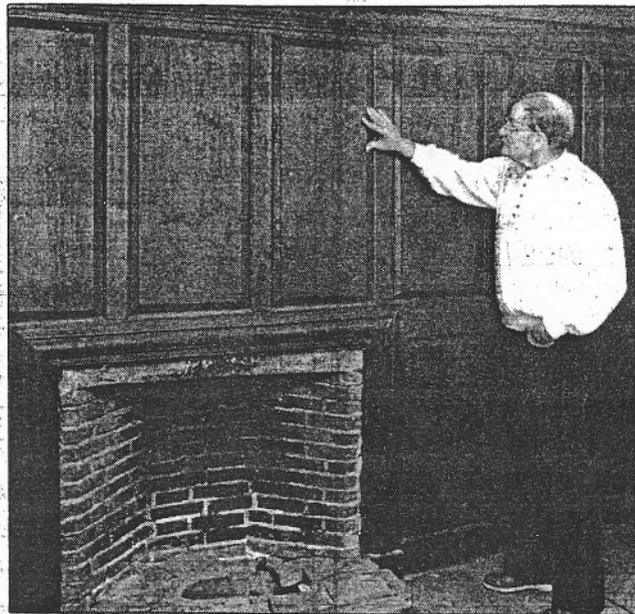
Scotland's Huntington House was built about 1730. The Huntingtons were relatively successful landowners and farmers. The New York Times recently featured an article about Huntington and his birthplace, and attempts to raise the funds to buy the house. It is informative and

well-written, but presents a view of old Yankees in the boonies, of poor country folk struggling to make their hometown hero nationally known.

In its search for style, the article underemphasized the sheer historical importance of Huntington and the building. The writer claimed that the only interesting thing that had ever happened in Scotland was a Ku Klux Klan rally in 1980, failing to note that Scotland is American history in microcosm, a story of farming, trading, turnpike building, political, religious and social revolution, industrialization and suburbanization. Furthermore, the back roads of Scotland provide views of historic, agrarian New England at its best.

Samuel Huntington worked on the family farm and was an apprentice cooper. He gained educational guidance from Ebenezer Devotion, the Scotland parish minister. At age 23, Huntington was admitted to the Connecticut bar and briefly practiced law in Windham.

In 1756 he moved to Norwich, the bustling port and social and economic center of colonial eastern Connecticut. His rise there was rapid. At age 42, Huntington was appointed to the colony's highest court, and



Fran Funk

Channing Huntington, president of the Gov. Samuel Huntington Trust Inc., examines wood paneling in a second-story room in the Huntington House in Scotland. The room may have served as a family study or a meeting room for town affairs.

he later became a member of the General Assembly.

Although a political moderate, the continual intransigence of the British drove him into an active role in the colony's break with George III. Throughout the Revolution he served in the Continental Con-

gress and the Connecticut General Assembly, and in 1779, Huntington became the president of Congress. During his term, the Articles of Confederation went into effect, arguably making him America's first president.

In 1786, he became Connect-

icut's governor and was influential in laying the groundwork for the state's rapid industrial expansion. The first manufacturing company to be incorporated in the new nation was a silk manufacturing company in Mansfield in 1789. During his governorship, Huntington visited his hometown regularly, and often lodged with his good friend, James Cogswell, Scotland's pastor.

Samuel Huntington died 200 years ago. So, on this very important anniversary, rally round and help save the Huntington House. The trust urgently needs funds to secure the house's future as a museum/research center. Send contributions, however small, to the Gov. Samuel Huntington Trust Inc., P.O. Box 210, Scotland 06264. For further information, take a look at Larry Gerlach's 1976 book, "Connecticut Congressman: Samuel Huntington, 1731-1796," or call the trust at 546-6862.

Next week: View Huntington's 1783 portrait, and discover the story behind it.

Tom Beardsley, a free-lance public historian, was the scholar-in-residence and co-director of the Windham Textile and History Museum from 1990 to 1995.

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