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The Public History of John Adams: How and Why a Fresh Portrayal of the Founding Father Americans Previously Looked Past Has Recently Formed

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The Public History of John Adams: How and Why a Fresh
Portrayal of the Founding Father Americans Previously Looked
Past Has Recently Formed

By
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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for
Honors in the Department of History

UNION COLLEGE

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Introduction

John Adams was a man very much aware of his own fate in the history of the American Revolution. In 1790, he wrote to his friend Benjamin Rush on the Revolution, “The essence of the whole will be that Dr. Franklin’s electrical rod smote the earth and out sprung General Washington. That Franklin electrified him with his rod and thence forward these two conducted all the policy, negotiation, legislation, and war.”¹ Adams did not think that future generations of Americans would remember him for the important part he played in the founding of the nation. Of course, the only man missing from Adams’ sarcastic prediction of who would be utterly glorified by posterity was his respected friend and colleague, Thomas Jefferson. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and other Founding Fathers have been personified in Americans’ minds as examples of Republican virtue and courage. Historians and politicians have contributed greatly to this idealism. Before the late twentieth century, the “Founding Fathers,” a phrase first used by President Warren G. Harding in 1916, were known more as legendary or sacred characters symbolic of American values than as the men they really were.² Early biographers and politicians of these men contributed greatly to this idealism. The George Washington biographer, Parson Weems, created the famous cherry tree anecdote to demonstrate George Washington’s virtue in his popular book, *The Life of*

¹ David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 420.

² R.B. Bernstein, *The Founding Fathers Reconsidered* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

Washington (1800).³ The best examples of American idolization of past historical figures can be found on the National Mall in the form of large, grandiose monuments to George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln, but as John Adams predicted, there have been no monuments built to him.

The faces depicted on a country's currency tell a lot about who is considered to be an important part of their past. In current circulation, the United States has eleven different people on its currency, including two women. If Adams were alive today, he might be a little offended by the fact that Washington and Franklin are included, as well as his political adversaries Jefferson and Hamilton, but that he is not. In addition to faces on currency, the names of towns, counties, and states also serve as a reminder of whom the government considers worthy of remembrance. Judging by the number of namesakes he has in the United States, George Washington is the ultimate example of American commemoration. Not only does he have the most counties named after him with thirty, but also he has an entire state in his name and the nation's capital. Coming in at second and third is Jefferson and Franklin, with twenty-six and twenty-five counties respectively. "Adams County" is only the seventeenth most popular county name, with twelve.⁴ If the amount of governmental memorialization on a subject directly correlates to the amount of interest historians have taken in it, then that would explain why at the Schaffer Library at Union College, there are eight shelves full of secondary sources on George Washington, six on Thomas Jefferson, and two on John Adams.

³ Mason L. Weems, *A History of the Life and Death, Virtues and Exploits of General George Washington* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1918), 22-23.

⁴ National Association of Counties, "Researching County Names."

There have been several explanations by historians as to why Adams has not been included on the same level of recognition as his Revolutionary brothers in the past. In 1933, Adams biographer Gilbert Chinard wrote,

“During his life he failed to appeal to the imagination of his contemporaries, and to posterity he bequeathed no sharply coined motto, no political maxims to be quoted on patriotic occasions and used in electoral campaigns. Never yearning for popular applause, he was refused popular recognition after his death and no legend has formed around him. In a country where hero worship may be considered a national trait, he seems to have been excluded from the Pantheon of great Americans.”⁵

In 1992, John Ferling wrote that despite John Adams’ accomplishments, he has been one of the least understood of the Founding Fathers, and

“According to conventional wisdom, the contributions that he made to his age are less significant than those of the other great leaders of Revolutionary America...To some he has even been a comic figure, a man full of puff and pomposity, a vain, posturing sort who took on a ridiculous cast when he sought to play a role for which he was ill suited.”⁶

If this was the popular contention before 1992, then it is no wonder that statues and monuments have not been made of the man for the public to worship. Ferling goes on to explain that the reason Adams has been judged more harshly and seen as more vain, petty, and malicious than Washington, Jefferson, or Franklin is because of the sheer amount of candid letters from Adams and how open and honest he was in his diary. The feelings and thoughts in the letters and diaries of Washington, Jefferson, and Franklin, are much more private and guarded, revealing little about them as men. Adams’ candid nature in his writings have made clear his faults, and this has

⁵ Gilbert Chinard, *Honest John Adams* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1933), v.

⁶ John Ferling, *John Adams: A Life* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 2-3.

led to the misinterpretation that Adams is actually more faulted than the other Founding Fathers.⁷

Although Adams has received much less recognition in the form of monuments, namesakes, and in the sheer volume of attention from historians over the span of American history than his Revolutionary colleagues, he has recently begun to gain a lot more attention. In the past twenty years or so, interest in John Adams has risen dramatically among historians and the public. Joseph J. Ellis, a Pulitzer Prize winning historian who focuses on the founding era, published *Passionate Sage* in 1993. By being the first to take into heavy account Adams' writings and correspondences in his later years, Ellis was the first to truly bring to life a whole picture of Adams, the man, instead of Adams, the one-term President, which led to a renewed interest in Adams among historians. Inspired by Ellis, the already accomplished, Pulitzer Prize winning biographer, David McCullough published the biography, *John Adams*, in 2001, which itself won a Pulitzer. It became one of the fastest-selling non-fiction books in history, and the best-selling book in history for the publisher.⁸ The popularity of *John Adams* has spurred a dramatic rise in the public's interest in John Adams, and is the basis for the highly successful, seven-part 2008 HBO mini-series, *John Adams*. The Adams National Historical Park in Adams' hometown of Quincy, Massachusetts, which came under the governance of the National Park Service in 1946, has also benefitted from this newfound popularity. From 2000 to 2001, annual recreational visitation doubled, from 87,347

⁷ Ferling, *John Adams: A Life*, 4.

⁸ Bob Hoover. "David McCullough: America's historian, Pittsburgh son." *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 30 December 2001.

to 167,500.⁹ After the HBO series aired in 2008, 2009 saw a 66 percent increase in visitors to the park, as over 800,000 people visited, hoping to get a glimpse of the homes featured prominently in the series.¹⁰

The spark in interest and recognition for John Adams comes at a time when historians' focus on the Founding generation has changed course. Getting away from the mythos that pervaded the historical accounts of the Founding Fathers in the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century, historians have begun to look at these men as mortal. David McCullough has said, "I think it's important to remember that these men are not perfect. If they were marble gods, what they did wouldn't be so admirable. The more we see the founders as humans the more we can understand them."¹¹ Another Pulitzer Prize winning book on the era, Joseph J. Ellis' popular *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (2000), reflects McCullough's assertion, as do other popular books published since this shift, including Edmund S. Morgan's *The Meaning of Independence* (1976) and Gordon S. Wood's *Revolutionary Characters* (2006).

Many Americans have complained about history being their least favorite subject in school, or despised learning about significant people or events in our past, because analysis can be detail-oriented, inconsistent, boring, and downright confusing. Even still, Americans are consuming the past everyday in mass amounts and enjoying it too. Approximately twenty-four million people visit the mecca of

⁹ National Park Service, "National Park Service Visitor Use Statistics," NPS Stats Report Viewer.

¹⁰ Randi Minetor, "2010 visitation grew in some national parks, dropped in others," Examiner.com, entry posted February 7, 2011.

¹¹ Todd Leopold, "David McCullough brings 'John Adams' to life," CNN Entertainment, entry posted June 7, 2001.

American public history every year, the National Mall in Washington, D.C.¹² Historical authors such as David McCullough and Stephen Ambrose have become famous through record sales and film adaptations. People buy tickets to watch Civil War Reenactments, to tour famous Americans' birthplaces, and they sit in their living rooms together to watch the History Channel. So do Americans, in fact, love history? It would seem to depend on the presentation. The National Council on Public History describes public history as "the many and diverse ways in which history is put to work in the world."¹³ It is a term that describes those areas outside of academia, where history is presented to the public through mediums such as museums, historic sites, or film and television. If forms of public history are how people are consuming history, then it is important to take a look at what little public history there is on John Adams in order to understand his legacy.

The increase in the public interest of John Adams since 2001 has raised some interesting questions regarding the nature of public history and its place in modern America. Through what little public history there is on John Adams, can there be answers as to why he has become so popular in the past decade? What is it about Adams and his character that Americans have begun to take an interest in? Does the public history on Adams consumed by Americans today accurately reflect the academic history on him? How does the public history on Adams reflect upon the way Americans learn about the past in today's age? It has already been well established by historians that John Adams is deserving of more recognition and memorialization than he has received, but if he gets it, how should the public or the

¹² National Park Service, "Frequently Asked Questions," National Mall.

¹³ National Council on Public History, "What is Public History?"

government proceed with this memorialization? Should his plump figure be idolized in marble like Washington and Jefferson, or should a more realistic representation of the man prevail?

The lack of a pantheon-like building or phallic obelisk on the National Mall in honor of John Adams comes from the fact that his character and persona was never idealized or glorified throughout American history by historians in the first place. He was never a part of the abstract mythos of the Founding Fathers that encompassed the legacies of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin. The public history of John Adams, the Adams National Historical Park and the HBO mini-series, John Adams, ultimately say more about the generations creating them than about John Adams himself.

The Adams National Historical Park in Quincy, Massachusetts, created by Adams' descendants, is an attempt by the family to present Adams in all of his greatness, ignoring the darker side of the family's history, including alcoholism and suicide from the intense pressure to succeed, and their failures in order to create a legend of their own when the government did not consider Adams among the worthy. The popular HBO mini-series, John Adams, reflects a shift in how the Founding Fathers are now being portrayed, away from idolization and as the mortal men they really were. The series demonstrates that John Adams is relevant and revered today, because of his belief in the principles of law, his loving relationship with his wife, and his willingness to put the needs of the country over those of his party.

Literature Review

In recent years, a large volume of books have been published by historians on the subject of public history, making it clear that the subject is important to study, especially since a survey from the 1990s shows that the public picked museums and historical societies as the most trustworthy sources for historical information.¹⁴ The relatively new field of public history encompasses those areas of historical presentation outside of academia. From sculptors and museum curators to National Park Service Rangers and politicians, there are people other than academic historians and history professors playing an important role in shaping how the American public remembers our own story. We even do this at home when we put together scrapbooks of family memories. Scrapbooking is an apt analogy for what public historians do when they create “an intimate record of important stories, personalities, experiences, and artifacts to be preserved and interpreted by both its creators and successive generations.”¹⁵ There is still a lot of debate over what exactly public history is, and whether or not it is a serious discipline, but there is no doubt that it is important, as it has become so popular.

The practice of creating and preserving history for the public can be traced back to the nineteenth-century when women’s voluntary associations began preservation work and historical societies began to form.¹⁶ Public history as a

¹⁴ Denise D. Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks: Toward a New Genealogy of Public History* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), xv.

¹⁵ Tammy S. Gordon, *Private History in Public: Exhibition and the Settings of Everyday Life* (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2010), ix.

¹⁶ Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks*, xiv.

profession or course of study in the academic world has come into vogue in the last couple of decades. Denise D. Meringolo dates it to the 1970s, when a group of university professors allied themselves with other historians working for the government and historical societies, in order to create more jobs at the universities for history PhDs. The first public history graduate program and the first professional public history journal were founded in the 1970s.¹⁷

In order to understand public history, one must understand the concept of “public space.” The word public comes from the Latin word *publica* meaning “pertaining to the people.” In America, we tend to think of the word “public” in terms of spaces. We have public parks, halls, and restrooms, all of which are run by local, state, or federal government, for citizens to use at their leisure. The term “public” often describes a generalized group of people. There is a link between democracy, public spaces, and public discourse. Democracies need real, material spaces in order for citizens to participate in the democratic process, such as space to protest, demonstrate, or debate. These spaces are known as *traditional* public spaces. Public spaces directly support democracies, because they facilitate public discourse. Parks, main streets, town squares, and town halls are all examples of public spaces where people are free to engage in public discourse.¹⁸ Of course, not *all* Americans have been allowed to use public spaces, as racial and religious minorities have been discriminated against in our government’s history. This brings

¹⁷ Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks*, xiv.

¹⁸ Jennifer Barrett, *Museums and the Public Sphere* (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 9.

up an important theme in the study of public history in America, that of deciding whom we consider American.

What all historians do is help to explain, understand, and appreciate the past. The biggest difference between academic or traditional historians and those in the sub-field of public history is their audience. Patricia Mooney-Melvin writes, "If the professional historical community cared about what the public learned about the past, it would participate more directly and visibly in the efforts to present responsible interpretation to visitors at historic sites, museums, historical societies, and monuments."¹⁹ Mooney-Melvin seeks a historical field in which engaging society as a whole is its central purpose, instead of just engaging others in the academic world. Constance B. Schulz, while examining the role of public historians, explains that there are some people working in public history who came up through the academy and then received on-the-job training at national parks or historical societies which allowed them to "work with a more inclusive range of primary sources, and give more priority to cross-disciplinary and collaborative work."²⁰ She considers it a good thing that not all people working in public history are from the same educational background, as some started working in the field as amateurs with a simple love for history and preservation, or curators and librarians from library science programs or anthropology programs.²¹ A variety in educational background ensures a more varied display in how public history is presented to its audience, and better engages society as a whole.

¹⁹ James B. Gardner and Peter S. LaPaglia, *Public History: Essays from the Field* (Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Company, 2006), 16.

²⁰ Gardner and LaPaglia, *Public History: Essays from the Field*, 3.

²¹ Gardner and LaPaglia, *Public History: Essays from the Field*, 24.

There are some historians who disagree as to whether reaching a wider audience should be the main goal for all historians. William Hogeland is one of them, arguing that public history, including television and historical novels, celebrate their subjects to the point where they leave out important criticisms on them, taking away from themes, which might be important to American history. He writes, "Public history must simplify."²² The simplification erases critical thoughts about our deepest conflicts. Peter J. Beck agrees with Mooney-Melvin and Schulz that historian's findings could only better historical knowledge and understanding if it reaches a wider audience. He errs on the side of caution, however, noting that there are complications and dangers to historical accuracy, such as inauthenticity, mistranslations, and historical revisionism, when reaching out to a wider audience through public history. He notes the trouble that Stephen Ambrose, author of *Band of Brothers*, found himself in when he was accused of lifting whole passages from other presenters without using quotations.²³

In most cases, places of public history today in America are either run by or deeply entangled in the government. The biggest government influence on public history is the National Park Service, a federal agency that manages all the national parks and many national monuments. The National Mall in Washington, D.C. is overseen by the NPS. Considering everything from the hiring of upper staff to funding has to be approved by the Senate, there is an obvious link to government in managing public history. The marriage between government and public history

²² William Hogeland, *Inventing American History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), xiii.

²³ Peter J. Beck, *Presenting History: Past and Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 255-256.

highlights the need to study how and why we remember who or what. Politics, at the local, state, and federal level, play a role in what we as a country find important enough to memorialize. Whether it be the Lincoln Memorial or George Washington's birth home, there is a certain image or opinion being produced for a reason.

Another area of contention regarding public history lies in the purpose of monuments, especially on the National Mall. Nathaniel Macon argued in 1800, that America does not need a physical place of idolatrous statues and ritual to remember our past heroes when they could simply be read about in history books.²⁴ Although visiting Washington is often compared to embarking on a religious pilgrimage to seek relics or visit a holy site, historian Kirk Savage points out that the monumental core in Washington actually contains no artifacts from the subjects' time, nor does it present traces of recreating another place in time. Everything there is pure representation.²⁵ The Gettysburg Address is put up in every school and public office throughout the country so why do we need it at a memorial site to ensure that it remains in public memory? Savage sums up why he thinks memorials are important, despite their iconic nature, by writing, "Why make a pilgrimage to a site with no historical significance to read a text that was already everywhere? The answer is simple: the monument manufactures its own aura."²⁶ The experience in viewing the grandeur of the stone, paneled Gettysburg Address at the Lincoln Memorial is so extraordinary that one gains more from it than memorizing and

²⁴ Kirk Savage, *Monument Wars: Washington D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 4.

²⁵ Savage, *Monument Wars*, 4-5.

²⁶ Savage, *Monument Wars*, 5-6.

discussing it in grade school. It presents to Americans that this text is of such importance that it is almost sacred.

Also questioned for their purpose or relevance to American history are historical houses and birthplaces. Seth C. Bruggeman argues that the way we present and manipulate historical objects of the past demonstrates how groups of people claim power over historical authority, and that birthplace memorials speak volumes about how Americans remember the people they consider important in history. Through a case study on George Washington's birthplace memorial, Bruggeman explains how birthplace memorials say much more about the people who sponsor and create them, than the people they are commemorating.²⁷ Birthplace markers and memorials are an important part of how we create an American narrative story based on popular memory as opposed to academic history. Historian Patricia West agrees with Seth C. Bruggeman. In one essay, she writes, "The standard house tour draws the visitor into a narrative that climaxes in a happy ending, a satisfying closure that may or may not reflect the facts of biography."²⁸ She believes that house museums also reject fact in favor of myth or legend, but she does not think there is a point in historians merely debunking these facts. She argues for a much more productive search for the meaning behind the presentation of these houses.²⁹ In her book, *Domesticating History*, West summarizes that historians should not view house museums as "shrines," or concentrate on their

²⁷ Seth C. Bruggeman, *Here, George Washington Was Born: Memory, Material Culture, and the Public History of a National Monument* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 9.

²⁸ Seth C. Bruggeman, ed., *Born in the U.S.A.: Birth, Commemoration, and American Public Memory* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 262.

²⁹ Bruggeman, ed., *Born in the U.S.A.*, 263.

founders' wishes for them, because they have always been more about the politics of the time in which they were created and their ever-changing representations.³⁰

Methodology

The two main primary sources I used in my thesis were my own experience as a visitor at the Adams National Historical Park and my own experience in viewing the HBO mini-series, John Adams. Other primary sources used were letters, diaries, and books of the Adams family. I have used secondary sources by other historians on John Adams and his family, in order to gain background knowledge and accurate information on him and to analyze the different ways in which he has been perceived. Of these sources, I have asked certain questions, including: Through what little public history there is on John Adams, can answers as to why he has become so popular in the past decade be answered? Does the public history accurately reflect the academic history? How does the public history on Adams reflect upon the way Americans learn about the Founding Fathers in today's age? The most important secondary source I use, *John Adams* by David McCullough, has faced some criticism for its lack of consideration regarding Adams' political thoughts. I consider it the most important, because it the basis for the HBO mini-series, John Adams.

Through analyses of these two examples of public history, I have been able to examine why John Adams has garnered the public's attention in more recent times as an American hero and whether or not it is an historically accurate representation. The specific ways Adams is portrayed through these mediums contribute to his

³⁰ Patricia West, *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999), xii.

popular standing and relevance today, and these portrayals ultimately say more about the generations creating them than about John Adams himself. The Adams National Historical Park in Quincy, Massachusetts, created by Adams' descendants, is an attempt by the family to present Adams in all of his greatness, ignoring the darker side of the family's history, including alcoholism and suicide from the intense pressure to succeed, and their failures in order to create a legend of their own when the government did not consider Adams among the worthy. The popular HBO mini-series, John Adams, reflects a shift in how the Founding Fathers are now being portrayed, away from idolization and as the mortal men they really were. The series demonstrates that John Adams is relevant and revered today, because of his belief in the principles of law, his loving relationship with his wife, and his willingness to put the needs of the country over those of his party.

In the first chapter, I describe the history of the Adams National Historical Park, which includes the birthplaces of John Adams and John Quincy Adams, and the Old House estate, which John Adams bought and three subsequent generations lived in. The theme of the Park is "Enduring Legacy," a glorification of four generations of Adams' and their contributions to American history. The Park was originally set up by the Adams descendants, but has been upheld by the National Park Service since 1946. My second chapter focuses on the wildly successful, 2008 HBO mini-series John Adams. This series is an example of the shift in how the Founding Fathers are being remembered in recent decades as mortal men and not sacred symbols. I also use the way filmmakers portray Adams in the series to demonstrate why he has become relevant in today's world as an American hero. I include an Epilogue, which

discusses the future legacy of John Adams, including the proposed Adams Memorial, which Congress has approved to be built in Washington, D.C., and whether or not it may look like other monuments in the nation's capital.

Chapter I

Adams National Historical Park

There is no doubt that the houses and the artifacts at the Adams National Park in Quincy, Massachusetts, are historically accurate. The descendants of John Adams did not end up with the same fate as those of Thomas Jefferson, having to sell Monticello because of debt accumulated by Jefferson himself. Everything in the houses belonged to members of the family, and nothing has been changed at the Park since 1927, when the descendants inherited the place with the intention of turning it into a museum. With clear and good intentions to memorialize their ancestors, the descendants of four generations of Adams' who contributed much to American history gave the property to the National Park Service in 1946. The Park website says, "the Adams Memorial Society...charged the National Park Service with the distinct mission to 'foster civic virtue and patriotism' at Adams National Historical Park."³¹ A tour of the Park leaves the visitor with a great deal of knowledge about the accomplishments of these generations, but does the "Enduring Legacy" theme accurately reflect upon these men or on the family dynamics? Many negative details of the Adams family history are left out of the tour, including overbearing parents, alcoholism, and anti-Semitism. As aforementioned, Adams was not given proper recognition nationally for his part in American history, and so the

³¹ National Park Service, "History and Culture," Adams National Historical Park.

Adams descendants set out to create a place in which he and his family could receive the attention they felt they deserved.

Experiencing the Park

Driving into Quincy, Massachusetts today, the eighth largest city in Massachusetts, it's hard to believe that this major metropolitan area was once a quiet, farming town called Braintree. Nicknamed the "City of Presidents," it is the birthplace of the second and sixth Presidents of the United States, John Adams and John Quincy Adams, as well as John Hancock, who was the longest serving President of the Continental Congress. Across from the train station at the intersection of Hancock and Adams Street is President's Place, a building that houses the Visitor's Center for the Adams National Historical Park. The first thing I noticed upon entering the Visitor's Center were the many books and nick-knacks for sale on the various members of the Adams family and other Revolutionary heroes. If I didn't know any better, I would assume it was a little gift shop. The two-hour tour of the two presidential birthplaces and the "Old House" costs only five dollars. I had to run back quickly to my car to put my backpack back, because the receptionist told me that after September 11, they stopped letting people bring backpacks on the tour.

The tours run about every half-hour by trolley, and visitors are encouraged to watch a 25-minute visitor orientation film called Enduring Legacy. Laura Linney, Tom Hanks, and Paul Giamatti, who were all apart of the HBO miniseries John Adams, lent their voices to the film as narrators. The film gives a brief history of four generations of Adams' that lived in the Old House, John Adams, John Quincy Adams, Charles Francis Adams, and Henry and Brooks Adams. It highlights their

achievements and family lives at home in the Old House. The film does a good job of preparing the visitor with background knowledge of the history of the Adams family and the Park.

On the quick trolley ride to the birthplace houses, a couple from Texas asks me where I am from. When I say a half-hour away, they are amazed that this is my first time visiting the Adams NHP. Seeing the Old House has been on the husband's bucket list since he read David McCullough's *John Adams*. My field trips throughout elementary and middle school never took us to this particular Park. Getting off the trolley, I get my first glances of the houses where John Adams and John Quincy Adams were born. What once was a sprawling, 100-acre plus farm is now surrounded by modern houses on every side, and stands at an intersection of which a busy, main street runs within five yards of one of the houses, and fifteen of the other. It's hard to imagine the quiet solitude Adams enjoyed here with the noisy traffic behind me.

Looking at John Adams' birthplace, a plain, brown "saltbox," a popular eighteenth century New England home-style, and the term for a house with a pitched roof that slopes down in the back, creating two stories in the front and one in the back, the Park Ranger points out that a brick in the foundation is labeled 1681, making it the oldest surviving presidential birthplace in America. The second floor is unavailable to the visitors, because of wear and tear on the staircase, but the whole first floor is available to tour. There are three large, but simple rooms with almost no furniture except for a few, wooden chairs and tables. Only one of the rooms was painted, as paint was very expensive back then, and Adams' father, John

Sr., did not make that much money as a deacon and shoemaker. The ranger tells us stories about John's childhood and education, and how he eventually married Abigail and bought the bigger saltbox house next door from his brother. As John made more and more money from his law practice, he spent it on adding acreage to his farm, taking great pride in his ownership of the pasture and woods at the foot of Penn's Hill in Braintree.

The other home, the birthplace of John Quincy Adams, where John and Abigail lived in their newlywed years and throughout the Revolutionary War, is a beige-colored saltbox, slightly larger but much younger looking. This house is estimated to have been built in 1716, and has a separate entrance on the side, which leads to John's law office. This house, which has much more furniture in it, is also painted on the outside and the inside, and the Park Ranger says that Abigail and John are the ones who paid to have it painted as John became more prominent, signaling that John was achieving success as a lawyer. In one room there is a large table with bookcases surrounding the walls. This is the room in which John Adams drafted the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. John himself did not spend a lot of time at this house, as he was at first always travelling for law and then travelling to Philadelphia and overseas. We were not allowed upstairs in this house either: to protect the staircase. I cannot believe that both of these homes are still in condition enough that a visitor gets the feeling that they are stepping back in time when in them. It makes me think that the people of Quincy must really respect these buildings, as I would imagine anyone at night could vandalize or steal from them.

The trolley takes us about a mile down the road to the Old House, or “Piecefield,” as John Adams named it to represent the peace he helped make between America and Great Britain after the Revolution. The first thing the Park Ranger says to us is, “Now imagine you are John and Abigail, and you were living in a saltbox, and then you were put up in these grand, extravagant homes in Auteuil, France and in London. They had to have been thinking that the saltbox would simply not do for them anymore, and so while in London, they bought the Old House and its 40 acres.” This house is a mansion for an eighteenth-century New England estate, but the Park Ranger points out that many additions have been made by each generation.

One story I genuinely enjoyed was of Abigail Adams’ ingenuity. Abigail was a little disappointed at the size of the Old House upon arrival after their return from London, and especially the low ceilings in the living room and dining room downstairs. She wanted an addition to the right side of the house with a large parlor on the first floor with higher ceilings and a study on the second. The architect told her they had no way of raising the ceilings and that it was impossible. Legend has it that Abigail responded, “if we can’t go up, then we will go down.” To enter the parlor today, you simply have to go down one step and you are in a room in which the ceiling appears to have been raised.

There are many original paintings throughout the house of the family, and even one of George Washington in the dining room. All of the furniture and furnishings in the house are one-hundred percent original to the four generations of Adams’ that lived there and the Park Ranger claims that everything has been left the

way it's always been. Many of John and Abigail's belongings are still there, including furniture from their overseas travel and John's walking stick. A flower wreath that Abigail received in 1820 from a Seminary is in perfect condition framed in the Long Hall. You can step inside many of the rooms but the Park does a good job of cordoning off spaces with rope so that no furniture or walls can be touched by visitors. All of the rooms have books laid out on the tables, expressing how much the family valued education. Upstairs, we see the study and numerous bedrooms. The Park Ranger points out the chair on which John Adams had his fatal stroke. The room in which Nabby Adams, John and Abigail's only daughter, had her mastectomy and died later of breast cancer, was never set foot in again by John Adams thereafter according to the Ranger.

The last stop on the tour is the Stone Library, which is considered the first Presidential library in America, and which Charles Francis Adams had built on the grounds in 1870 to house his father and grandfather's voluminous collection of books, numbering over 12,000. A Bible Concordance from 1521 and a Mendi peoples' Bible given to John Quincy Adams are in the library still today and out on the large oval table. The coolest part is John Quincy Adams' desk from Congress on which he collapsed before his death, and the original, unfinished painting by Benjamin West of the Treaty of Peace. Leaving the Stone Library and taking some time to walk around the gardens and look at the house, it is easy to imagine why Adams was so happy to retire to Peacefield after decades of public service for the good of the country.

History of the Park

The farm at the foot of Penn's Hill, which is now just the two houses and small yards, was gradually built up by early generations of the Adams family. Deacon John, the second President's father, inherited ten acres of the farm, including John's birthplace, which shall be called Deacon John's cottage as the family refers to it and to avoid confusion. He accumulated many more acres along with the second house, which would become John Quincy's birthplace, and which shall be called President John's cottage, before leaving the farm to his sons upon his death in 1761.³²

President John bought his brother's share in 1774, and added to the farm himself as he distinguished himself as a lawyer. Eventually, the farm at Penn's Hill included about one hundred and forty acres, and was the family's homestead through the American Revolution, up until John and Abigail purchased the Old House in 1788.³³ It is on this farm that Abigail, managing the property on her own, wrote her famous letters to her husband while he was away at Continental Congress or in Europe. Abigail sometimes used Deacon John's cottage at the beginning of the war to house refugee friends from Boston or as a place where militia could stop for the night and dress wounds or make bullets over the fire.³⁴ In 1803, perhaps feeling nostalgic about his childhood after being away from Quincy from such a young age as a foreign service member and as a Senator, John Quincy purchased the Penn's Hill

³² Henry Adams, *The Birthplaces of Presidents John and John Quincy Adams in Quincy, Massachusetts* (Quincy: Printed for the Adams Memorial Society, 1936) 2.

³³ Adams, *The Birthplaces of Presidents John and John Quincy Adams in Quincy, Massachusetts*, 2.

³⁴ Adams, *The Birthplaces of Presidents John and John Quincy Adams in Quincy, Massachusetts*, 11.

farm from his father, but only lived there two summers before being appointed Minister to Russia. After that, the farm remained unoccupied by the Adams family forever.³⁵

Major Leonard Vassall, a wealthy merchant from Boston, purchased land in Braintree in 1730 and built the Old House as a country retreat in 1731.³⁶ Vassall's daughter and son-in-law, John and Anna Borland, inherited the property, and were among the gentry of Boston. They were also Loyalists, and in 1776, the widowed Anna along with many other Boston blue bloods fled the country for Britain. The courts leased the abandoned property out until 1787, when John and Abigail purchased it from London for £600.³⁷ As the first Minister to Great Britain at the Court of St. James's, and greatly responsible for the ensuing peace between the two countries, Adams felt prompted to name the estate, "Piecefield." As Vice-President and President from 1789-1801, he could only spend the summers there, but he and Abigail became the only full time residents Piecefield ever had from 1801 until his death in 1826.³⁸

John Quincy Adams inherited the house when his father died, but was only able to summer there. After his single term as President from 1825-1829, he became the only man who has served in the House of Representatives after being President. He never enjoyed the retirement at the Old House that his father did, as

³⁵ Adams, *The Birthplaces of Presidents John and John Quincy Adams in Quincy, Massachusetts*, 20-21.

³⁶ Henry Adams, *The Adams Mansion: the home of John Adams and John Quincy Adams, presidents of the United States* (Quincy: Printed for the Adams Memorial Society, 1935), 4.

³⁷ Adams, *The Adams Mansion*, 9.

³⁸ Adams, *The Adams Mansion*, 1.

he died during Congress in 1848.³⁹ The Old House became the summer home of John Quincy's son, Charles Francis, who achieved national success serving as a member of the House of Representatives and as Minister to Great Britain during the Civil War. The Adams family is the only American family to have had a father, son, and grandson all serve as ambassadors to the same country.⁴⁰

Charles Francis died in 1886, and the fourth and last generation of Adams' to live in the Old House became Henry Adams and Brooks Adams. Henry only lived there for three summers, and used the Stone Library to write his *History of the United States from 1801-1817*. A historian and journalist, Henry is most famous for his Pulitzer Prize winning, autobiography, *The Education of Henry Adams*, in which he criticized modern educational theory in comparison to his own. He even tells one story in it about his grandfather, John Quincy, taking him by the hand from the Old House one day to school when he did not want to go.⁴¹ Brooks Adams used the house as his summer home after his brother Henry died in 1918. Brooks was also nationally known, for his work as an historian and his treatises and predictions on the economy, mostly *The Law of Civilization and Decay*. When Brooks Adams died, childless, on February 13, 1927, he left the house to his nieces and nephews, and no one would live in the house again.⁴²

Henry Adams, a nephew of Brooks, wrote that, "Before he died Brooks Adams often expressed the hope that somehow after his death the Old House would be kept on as he had kept it. Many plans were suggested, but it was his known desire that it

³⁹ Adams, *The Adams Mansion*, 4.

⁴⁰ Adams, *The Adams Mansion*, 4.

⁴¹ Adams, *The Adams Mansion*, 16.

⁴² Adams, *The Adams Mansion*, 4.

should never leave the family that caused those who came after him to make it a memorial.”⁴³ Henry expressed that the descendants’ intent in founding the Adams Memorial Society at this time was to preserve the Old House as a memorial, much like Mount Vernon or Monticello. He believed that the house was even more special than those aforementioned, because of its occupation by four generations of the same family, who all achieved national fame, since the beginning of America’s independence.⁴⁴

Significance of Transfer to NPS

By 1942, Henry Adams and his cousin, Charles Francis Adams III, realized that the Adams Memorial Society would not be able to maintain the Old House on its own, financially. Henry wrote in his diary in August, “There is no doubt, we must take steps to give this place to the City of Quincy or the U.S.”⁴⁵ Again in November 1943, he wrote, “Charley wants to get rid of the Old House at any cost, and I agree with him. I...will get the machinery started. I wish we had done it in 1927 when Brooks Adams died. We are all getting old now and immediately is none too soon.”⁴⁶ They got in contact with their U.S. representative, Richard B. Wigglesworth, to get the process started, and at the annual Adams Memorial Society in March of 1944, the family voted unanimously to transfer the property to the federal government.⁴⁷

Charles wrote to Wigglesworth that the family indeed wanted to donate the property “for the benefit of the public” to the nation. The director of the National

⁴³ Adams, *The Adams Mansion*, 42.

⁴⁴ Adams, *The Adams Mansion*, 1.

⁴⁵ Malcolm Frieberg, *From Family to Nation*, (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1986), 70.

⁴⁶ Frieberg, *From Family to Nation*, 70.

⁴⁷ Frieberg, *From Family to Nation*, 70.

Park Service in the Department of the Interior at the time, Newton B. Drury, expressed to Wigglesworth that the NPS's advisory board had discussed the Old House as far back as the fall of 1937, and that they had declared it a place of "national significance," which surprised even the Adams family.⁴⁸ The events that unfolded after this in transferring the property to the NPS speak volumes on how much the federal government valued the historical significance of the property and wanted to share its history with the nation.

In the 1920s, the National Park Service went through a dramatic transformation in their purpose, which at its establishment was to preserve and protect the natural scenery and landscapes in America. In order to appease Eastern politicians, who complained that the NPS was a regional agency that brought no benefits to the Eastern United States (only one out of forty-three parks were in the East), the NPS began to expand their area of control.⁴⁹ Since the East did not have the vast, beautiful, natural scenery that the West did, the NPS saw its greatest opportunity to expand in the East in its historical sites. The NPS hired historians and museum professionals to help them with park selection.⁵⁰ Although their original goal was purely national expansion, the addition of these new professionals into the NPS changed the whole program, bringing historical and educational values of the parks to the forefront of the NPS's goals. One such museum curator, Clark Wissler, in 1929, suggested that new historic sites be chosen by the NPS that might

⁴⁸ Frieberg, *From Family to Nation*, 70-71.

⁴⁹ Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks*, 84.

⁵⁰ Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks*, 86.

“serve as indices of periods in the historical sequence of human life in America.”⁵¹ The NPS wanted to use specific sites as local narratives that would contain contextual background to tell the story of the American experience.⁵² For the first time in America, public history was officially recognized as a valuable tool for the government to ascribe national heritage to regional places, something that it has continued to do to this day.

The government’s acquisition of Adams National Historical Park is unique, because of the context of the National Park Service’s actions and focus at this time. After the New Deal and the Civilian Conservation Corps expanded park employment and resources, America’s entry into World War II did the opposite. The Director of the NPS was under pressure to sacrifice natural resources, such as timber in the parks, and to let the military use sites for troops’ training. The NPS’s budget drastically fell from \$21 million in 1940 to \$5 million in 1943.⁵³ The NPS at this time was also told to defer looking into the acquisition of new historic sites, per the request of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The Secretary of the Interior, Harold L. Ickes, hoped that the Old House as offered by the Adams Memorial Society would be a special circumstance. He wrote to President Roosevelt on January 24, 1945, and the President “authorized immediate negotiations be started.”⁵⁴ Twenty months later, in December of 1946, the transaction became official, and the Adams National Historic Site was established.⁵⁵ This is all made more spectacular a circumstance

⁵¹ Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks*, 95.

⁵² Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks*, 95-96.

⁵³ Meringolo, *Museums, Monuments, and National Parks*, 164.

⁵⁴ Frieberg, *From Family to Nation*, 71.

⁵⁵ Frieberg, *From Family to Nation*, 71.

when one considers that Roosevelt was not a fan of the Adams tribe. Roosevelt considered the Adams family to have a “superiority complex” and disliked John Quincy Adams who was a political enemy of Roosevelt’s hero, Andrew Jackson.⁵⁶ Roosevelt also knew Henry Adams and Charles Francis Adams, Jr., and remarked that “their relations were not very brotherly.”⁵⁷ So a President in the midst of war took time from his duties to make sure the home of a family he did not even admire became the nation’s, because he saw the historical value that it could offer the public.

“Enduring Legacy” theme at the Adams NHP

The Adams National Historical Park does a brilliant job of sharing the story of the public accomplishments of these four generations of the Adams family through the gateway of their private life at the Old House. In reality, the private life of these four generations of Adams family was far from successful or perfect. Charles Francis Adams remarked, “The history of my family is not a pleasant one to remember. It is one of great triumphs in the world but of deep groans within, one of extraordinary brilliancy and deep corroding mortification.”⁵⁸ The introduction film at the Visitor’s Center, which premiered in September of 2012, is appropriately titled, Enduring Legacy, and begins with the voice of Henry Adams, recalling 200 years of Adams family history, and hitting on their important contributions, like the

⁵⁶ William D. Hassett, *Off the Record with F.D.R., 1942-1945* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1958), 20.

⁵⁷ Hassett, *Off the Record*, 21.

⁵⁸ Paul C. Nagel, *Descent from Glory: Four Generations of the Adams Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 3.

Boston Massacre, the Amistad incident, and Henry and Brooks' writings.⁵⁹ The intent of the theme of the tour is clear from the beginning; that these five men in these four generations are the ones who created an "enduring legacy" for the Adams family, and that they, and sometimes the two First Ladies of the family, will be the family members whose stories are attributed to the houses. There is nothing more private than a family's home, but the tour given by the National Park Service Rangers glosses over some of the more intimate details of the family's past in favor of glorifying their public accomplishments.

Although they were not Puritans themselves, John and Abigail Adams' childrearing reflected the New England puritanical principles. A Puritan child entered the world with original sin and could only be rid of it through obedience and religious education. The Adams children, Nabby, John Quincy, Charles, and Thomas, were constantly reminded by John and Abigail that they would be deeply disappointed if their children did not exhibit good behavior and virtue.⁶⁰ As John became more successful, it was clear that in addition to his own need to be a great man, he wanted his sons to be great men. He wrote to John Quincy in April of 1794, after John Quincy reluctantly accepted the position of Minister to the Netherlands, "You come into life with advantages which will disgrace you if your success is mediocre...if you do not rise to the head not only of your profession, but of your country, it will be owing to your own *Laziness, Slovenliness, and Obstinacy*."⁶¹

⁵⁹ Jennifer Logue, "Adams National Historical Park to host Quincy premiere of new visitor center film September 21," Inside Quincy, entry posted September 7, 2012.

⁶⁰ Nagel, *Descent from Glory*, 29.

⁶¹ Paul C. Nagel, *John Quincy Adams: A Public Life, A Private Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 76.

John, however, was a largely absent father. During the crucial years of his young children's development, from 1774 to 1777, he was largely in Philadelphia, and from 1777 to 1788 he was mostly in Europe. John Quincy, at the age of 10, accompanied his father as his personal secretary to Europe, where he was given every opportunity to observe diplomatic and political life, and to get closer to his father, while his brothers were too young.⁶² Charles was also given the opportunity to go to Europe with his father in 1779 at the age of 9, but it is understood that he was too homesick for his mother, and was sent home unaccompanied by other family members in 1781.⁶³

It is no wonder that Charles and Thomas did not fare better than their oldest brother, John Quincy. The mixture of growing up with an absent father and the pressure to live up to their parents' expectations was too great for the two of them. By 1788, when John and Abigail returned to the United States, Charles was 18 and Thomas was 16. Charles was enrolled at Harvard at the time, and John had already gotten word abroad of his deplorable behavior there as he had led a student rebellion and begun to drink a lot; on one occasion, he ran naked through Harvard Yard with friends while heavily intoxicated.⁶⁴ As a lawyer in New York, Charles destroyed letters his father sent him which concentrated on his lack of virtue and selection of friends. Charles wrote back to his parents, wishing they did not believe

⁶² Nagel, *Descent from Glory*, 34.

⁶³ Nagel, *Descent from Glory*, 45.

⁶⁴ McCullough, *John Adams*, 411.

what they heard, and saying that the accusations were not true.⁶⁵ The charismatic, innocent child they had left behind in America had begun to resent his parents.

There was some hope that Charles would turn his life around after marrying Sally Smith and having two children, but he did not. Charles avoided answering questions in his letters as to his personal life, and, after borrowing \$4000 from John Quincy, never returned it.⁶⁶ In a letter to Abigail in October of 1799, John wrote,

“Sally Opened her Mind to me for the first time. I pitied her, I grieved, I mourned but could do no more. A Madman possessed of the Devil can alone express or represent. I renounce him. David’s Absalom had some ambition and some Enterprize. Mine is a mere Rake, Buck, Blood and Beast.”⁶⁷

Charles and his father never corresponded again, and he died on December 1, 1800. Charles’ death from alcoholism brought great shame upon the family, and he was not even buried in the family cemetery.⁶⁸ Charles may have found alcohol to be the only option to ease his anxieties of living up to the family name, or he may have chosen alcohol to rebel. Either way, he would not be the last Adams to choose this option.

Charles’ younger brother, Thomas, did not bring the same shame to his family that his brother did, but he was also far from perfect. Described as shy and unsure of himself, he started Harvard in 1786 at the age of 14 at the request of his parents, even though his aunt and brother had told them he was too young to be by himself.⁶⁹ Thomas had the charm and charisma that his father and brother, John

⁶⁵ Nagel, *Descent from Glory*, 52.

⁶⁶ Nagel, *Descent from Glory*, 78.

⁶⁷ Massachusetts Historical Society. “Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 12 October 1799.” Adams Family Resources.

⁶⁸ Nagel, *Descent from Glory*, 80.

⁶⁹ Nagel, *Descent from Glory*, 46.

Quincy, lacked, but he absolutely lacked in confidence. After the devastating passing of Nabby and Abigail in 1813 and 1818, his father only had his two boys left. With John Quincy achieving success as Secretary of State, John only had Thomas to be worried about.

Thomas' career as a lawyer was failing and he was not doing well financially, and so John begged him to move back to Quincy with his wife and five children.⁷⁰ Thomas, now caretaker to his elderly father, began to drink heavily as the weight of his failures crashed upon him. In one episode, he went on a drunken spree crashing around the Old House, and took off alone in the stagecoach for Boston.⁷¹ This is one event that took place at the family home of which the Park Rangers don't share on the tour of the Old House. Charles Francis wrote in May of 1824, at the age of 17, "He is one of the most unpleasant characters in this world, in his present degradation, being a brute in his manners and a bully in his family."⁷² After John died in 1826, John Quincy had to assume financial support of Thomas' family as his condition worsened. John Quincy was more sympathetic to Thomas than to Charles, perhaps because they spent so much more time together over the years. When Thomas died in March of 1832, unlike Charles, he was buried in the family cemetery in Quincy.⁷³

The Park Rangers make it a point to tell visitors how John and Abigail were always delighted to open their home to their large extended family, but make it

⁷⁰ McCullough, *John Adams*, 628.

⁷¹ Nagel, *Descent from Glory*, 133.

⁷² I.H. Butterfield, *Diary of Charles Francis Adams Vol. I* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), 164.

⁷³ Nagel, *Descent from Glory*, 178.

seem like it was on joyous terms. In reality, Nabby and her four children often fled to Quincy while her husband, Colonel William Stephens Smith, was either in jail for some economic scheme or fleeing creditors.⁷⁴ Charles' wife happened to be Colonel Smith's sister, Sally, who became fully dependent upon and lived with John and Abigail after Charles' death.⁷⁵ When Thomas and his wife moved back to Quincy, they had seven children, who were all eventually taken care of financially by John, John Quincy, and even Charles Francis later.⁷⁶ Years earlier, in the midst of the Revolution, John wrote a letter to Abigail about the children, saying,

"I will tell them that I studied and laboured to procure a free Constitution of Government for them to solace themselves under, and if they do not prefer this to ample Fortune, to Ease and Elegance, they are not my Children, and I care not what becomes of them. They shall live upon thin Diet, wear mean Cloths, and work hard, with Chearfull Hearts and free Spirits or they may be the Children of the Earth or of no one, for me."⁷⁷

A favorite story for the Adams NHP Rangers to tell at Deacon John's cottage, is one of a young John telling his father that he would take joy in being a simple farmer, which is not what his father wanted for his son. It seems as though John followed his father's attitude by pressuring his sons to become great men. Perhaps Charles and Thomas would have been happier men if they weren't pushed towards the family profession of law and politics. It is not known if John fully took blame for his sons' misfortunes later in life, because he did not write on the subject, but he did

⁷⁴ Nagel, *Descent from Glory*, 95.

⁷⁵ McCullough, *John Adams*, 573.

⁷⁶ Nagel, *Descent from Glory*, 179.

⁷⁷ Massachusetts Historical Society. "Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 15 April 1776" Adams Family Resources.

impart the following wisdom to John Quincy as he followed in his father's footsteps, that "children must not be wholly forgotten in the midst of public duties."⁷⁸

The pressures to succeed and become the next great Adams man did not end with John's children. On the Adams NHP Tour, it is noted that John Quincy Adams' son, Charles Francis Adams, was the next such great man to live in the Old House, but Charles Francis (b. 1807) was John Quincy's third oldest son. What happened to his older brothers, George Washington Adams (b. 1801) and John Adams II (b. 1803) and why did they not inherit the Old House? Just like their father's brothers, George and John II were left at a young age in the guidance of others. In 1809, when John Quincy became minister to Russia, his wife and the baby, Charles Francis, went with him, but his older sons were left with Abigail's sisters.⁷⁹

George is described as being a hyperactive and ungovernable child, who was always getting into trouble. Spending a lot of time at the Old House as a child, he became a favorite of his grandfather John, who said, "George is a treasure of diamonds. He has a genius equal to any thing, but like all other geniuses requires the most delicate management to prevent it from running into eccentricities."⁸⁰ As a father, John Quincy did not take the advice his father gave him about being a more attentive father, as he became stricter than his own. In his diary, George admitted that he lacked virtue and had a wild and fanciful imagination as a result of the lack of discipline he received while his parents were in Russia.⁸¹ He graduated from Harvard in 1821, but had more interest in poetry and art than in becoming a

⁷⁸ McCullough, *John Adams*, 635.

⁷⁹ Nagel, *Descent from Glory*, 103.

⁸⁰ Nagel, *Descent from Glory*, 103.

⁸¹ Nagel, *Descent from Glory*, 148.

lawyer.⁸² As his father became the President, George was elected to the Massachusetts State Legislature, but his personal life did not improve, and as he felt the constant pressure from his father to be a better Christian, he began to drink and display erratic behavior.⁸³ George's fate began to identically resemble his uncles'.

By 1827, John Quincy refused to write to his son, which only made him more depressed, but the President relented a little at the request of his wife, Louisa, and Charles Francis, who were very worried about George's health.⁸⁴ In 1829, George boarded a steamboat, which was supposed to take him to his parents, but passengers reported that he was talking to himself about birds. He asked the captain to take him ashore, but before the captain could decide, the 28-year-old George either jumped or fell into Long Island Sound, where his body washed up a month later.⁸⁵ Charles Francis wrote in his diary shortly after the body was found, that he found a request letter in George's room, which asked that the family take care of a young chambermaid, Eliza Dolph, whom George had seduced and gotten pregnant.⁸⁶ This probably explains why George had his final breakdown, as he contemplated facing his deeply religious father with the fact that he fathered an illegitimate child.

By the time George Washington Adams died, his family had more pity than anger toward him, but he would not be their first son to die prematurely, as John Adams II soon followed. John grew up with a fiery temper and lack of discipline

⁸² Nagel, *Descent from Glory*, 137.

⁸³ Nagel, *Descent from Glory*, 138.

⁸⁴ Nagel, *Descent from Glory*, 157.

⁸⁵ Nagel, *Descent from Glory*, 159.

⁸⁶ Butterfield, *Diary of Charles Francis Adams Vol. II*, 376.

from his distant parents like George.⁸⁷ In May of 1823, on the eve of John II's commencement, John Quincy and Louisa got word that he had led a student rebellion and riot, and was not being allowed to graduate.⁸⁸ As his namesake, John Adams asked his son John Quincy to go easy on John II and to be "tenderly and forgive him kindly."⁸⁹ Once again, John Quincy did not follow the advice of his father, who had learned in the worst ways that having happy sons was better than having great sons. As expected within the family history, John II became even worse of an alcoholic than his brother, and a depressed recluse from society.⁹⁰

Interestingly enough, John Quincy thought that the Old House at Quincy might be the answer to John II's problems. He begged him to move back to Quincy, saying it was "the last resort for my children...when they meet with nothing but disappointment elsewhere."⁹¹ It was too late for John II, as he died at the age of 31 in October of 1834 in Washington. Charles Francis wrote the next month,

"Both my brothers with whom I had shared all these hopes and feelings gone, corrupted by the very luxury we longed for...My own views and feelings changed and changing. My situation in life now removed from all prospects of ambition, and from scenes of exalted intrigue. What is Washington to me now, but the monument of my father's disappointment, the grave of my brothers, and the memorial of most of the misery and all of the vice of my own past life."⁹²

For the fourth generation, there were more familial examples of failure than success in the political world, and ambition to succeed in Washington for some of the Adams' flickered out. Henry and Brooks Adams were more content to comment on

⁸⁷ Nagel, *Descent from Glory*, 104.

⁸⁸ Nagel, *Descent from Glory*, 140.

⁸⁹ Nagel, *Descent from Glory*, 141.

⁹⁰ Nagel, *Descent from Glory*, 171.

⁹¹ Nagel, *Descent from Glory*, 172-173.

⁹² Butterfield, *Diary of Charles Francis Adams Vol. VI*, 11.

politics in Washington than to get involved. Throughout the Adams NHP tour, there is no mention of the four Adams men who died as a result of depression and alcoholism. The basic theme that John and John Quincy sacrificed being away from farm and family while trying to create a better America for the country does not fully capture the total cost of their ambition.

Unlike their great-grandfather John, Henry and Brooks Adams were born into a world of great wealth and privilege. Their father, Charles Francis, had married Abigail Brown Brooks, whose father, Peter Chardon Brooks, was a millionaire and the richest man in Boston at the time of his death.⁹³ It is noted throughout the tour that Henry and Brooks were the scholarly type, and their numerous academic distinctions are praised.

What is not praised or mentioned on the tour, however, is one of the brothers' anti-Semitic sentiments. In Henry Adams' most celebrated accomplishment, the Pulitzer Prize winning *The Education of Henry Adams*, the second paragraph of the entire work starts out by saying,

"Had he been born in Jerusalem under the shadow of the Temple and circumcised in the Synagogue by his uncle the high priest, under the name of Israel Cohen, he would scarcely have been more distinctly branded, and not much more heavily handicapped in the races of the coming century."⁹⁴

The world in which Henry and Brooks Adams lived in was a changing one. The turn of the twentieth century saw a large influx of European immigrants and a different socioeconomic structure. Henry Adams, who was of the "old money" world, identified Jews with the change in the economic structure and increase in finance

⁹³ Nagel, *Descent from Glory*, 163.

⁹⁴ Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (New York: Random House, 1931), 3.

capitalism, specifically money lending in America.⁹⁵ During the economic crisis of 1893, he wrote, "I detest them and everything connected with them, and I live only and solely with the hope of seeing their demise, with all their accursed Judaism. I want to see all the lenders at interest taken out and executed."⁹⁶ While it is true that Adams' rhetoric towards the Jewish people was similar to many men in his "Boston Brahmin" society at the time, his prejudiced association of communism and finance capitalism with the Jews was the same dangerous prejudice during the early twentieth century that eventually led to the Holocaust.

According to the Park Rangers at Adams National Historical Park, the main messages they want to get across to the visitors are the family's commitment to public service, the sacrifices they made for the country, their love of knowledge, and their love of nature. All of this is accomplished through a tour of Deacon John's cottage, President John's cottage, and the Old House. However, there is so much more to be told about this family, and of course, as aforementioned, a lot of it is negative. Since the property was set up as a memorial of sorts by Brooks Adams before his death for the purpose of turning it into a museum and has not changed since, it is no wonder that the accomplishments of the family are highlighted while the failures and miseries are not. Charles Francis set out to publish his family's papers, especially John and Abigail's letters to each other, because he felt historians wrongly judged them based on their political failures and outward appearances in Washington. He thought that their letters would show them in a more pleasing and

⁹⁵ Edward N. Saveth, *American Historians and European Immigrants 1875-1925* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948), 74-75.

⁹⁶ Steven H. Norwood and Eunice G. Pollack, *Encyclopedia of American Jewish History: Vol. I* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2008), 172.

affectionate light, but as Charles Francis commented that his family history was one of “deep corroding mortification,” he couldn’t bring himself to publish the most personal documents and letters from the family papers.⁹⁷ The Adams National Historical Park does not fully represent the family’s true personal history, but because it was originally presented by the family themselves, it is a happier reminder of the successes they did have.

⁹⁷ Nagel, *Descent from Glory*, 8.

Chapter II

HBO Mini-series: John Adams

Banking on the recent success of historical films and television programs in the past twenty or so years, Tom Hanks and HBO teamed up yet again for another epic miniseries, John Adams. After producing Band of Brothers, which turned out to be a huge hit and is still aired frequently on other channels, Hanks got the ball rolling on the Revolutionary Era project after reading historian David McCullough's Pulitzer Prize winning book, *John Adams* (2001). The series premiered on HBO on March 16, 2008 and the seven-episode arch ran through April 20, 2008. Kirk Ellis wrote the screenplay and Tom Hooper, an Englishman, directed the series. It received rave reviews and won many awards, including four Golden Globes and thirteen Emmys, with wins for Outstanding Miniseries, Outstanding Writing for a Miniseries or Movie, Lead Actor in a Miniseries or Movie, and Lead Actress in a Miniseries or Movie, breaking the record for most Emmy wins by a miniseries.

A great amount of money, research, and thought went into making sure the dress, makeup, and setting were as authentic to the time period as they could be. The production budget was estimated to be at \$100 million, and was filmed over six months both in Virginia and Hungary, where they made use of the grand castles and homes there that would represent Europe. In order to recreate eighteenth century

fashion, 40,000 pieces of wardrobe and 1,500 wigs were made.⁹⁸ Paul Giamatti, an actor who usually portrays quirky characters, played John Adams, and Laura Linney, the actress who played Abigail Adams, said of the production, “I’ve never seen anything like this. I’ve never seen anything this large. I’ve never seen anything this detailed. I’ve never seen across the board designers of this caliber.”⁹⁹ Clearly, the filmmakers thought that presenting Americans with the story of John Adams’ life as a founder and showing how important he was in the creation of our nation was worth all the money, time, and effort.

The filmmakers set out to produce an epic portrayal of life during the Revolutionary Era through the eyes of a man who was in the midst of it all. John Adams, in comparison to George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin, has been wildly underappreciated and ignored until this past decade. Just take a look at the faces on our paper money and coins, or visit the National Mall in Washington, D.C. to see whom we have considered “important enough” in our past history to be commemorated. Adams is not there. The recent “Adams family mania” is a direct result of McCullough’s book and the HBO series. Why have Americans jumped on the John Adams bandwagon? How have the filmmakers portrayed Adams’ character as a politician, friend, husband, and father? How does Adams’ story relate to the political state of America in recent years? Notice the word, “story.” This series is a story. The “narrators,” the filmmakers, have an agenda and a purpose, conscious or not, in choosing how they portray John Adams and create his legacy.

⁹⁸ Martin Miller. “A Revolutionary Leading Man.” Los Angeles Times, 16 March 2008.

⁹⁹ The Making of John Adams

In the featurette, The Making of John Adams, David McCullough said, "I don't think anyone who sees this film will think of the American Revolution and the Founders in the same way again. It isn't just that they will have a better understanding of it. They will feel it."¹⁰⁰ Just like curators and tour guides at museums or parks do with history, the filmmakers hoped to make the history come alive in a way that would enthrall people to be more passionate about the subject of the Revolutionary Era and John Adams. Portraying Adams' story through film produces more emotion in the viewer's experience than a reader's experience of text. When Nabby Adams reads the Declaration of Independence out loud to her mother and brothers while suffering from inoculation of smallpox and having had her father gone for long periods of time for the cause, bringing tears to Abigail's eyes, the viewer fully comprehends the meaning of our country's most sacred text, how much it meant to them then, and the sacrifices it took to produce it. You cannot replicate that experience reading the Declaration of Independence from a history textbook.

In popular American history, Washington is remembered as the supreme father of our country and the hero of the Revolutionary War, Jefferson for authoring the Declaration of Independence, and Franklin for his many sayings and inventions. U.S. history classes teach that Adams was the President who signed the Alien and Sedition Acts. Tom Hanks said, "The first time I came across the fact that John Adams defended the Boston Massacre soldiers and got them acquitted was in David McCullough's book...if I had known that at any time I was a student of American

¹⁰⁰ The Making of John Adams

history, the back of my little head would have blown off.”¹⁰¹ John Adams has provided Americans with a new lens through which to view the Revolution and the Founders, reflecting upon a shifting change in how historians are writing about the Founding Fathers. This series, unlike the many films or paintings on the Revolution produced before it, does not romanticize or glorify the era. Nothing about the time was pretty or perfect. We know how the Revolution ended, but we often take for granted the events that led to our independence and how much of a miracle it was that it was a success. The storyline creates suspense in such a way that the viewer is not sure who the great men are or whether they will succeed. If nothing else, this film shows us how difficult it was to be alive in early America, and gives the viewer a newfound appreciation for what these men, who all gave up their previous lives for what they saw as their duty, did for our country. What this series has done for the legacy of John Adams is that it has brought him up to par with Washington and Jefferson in Americans’ minds as a hero of the Revolution and as a man who, despite his many flaws, is deserving of more credit and adulation than he has received in the past. It is also important to note, however, that the series takes some liberty with precise history in order to do so.

Getting the Details Right

Upon meeting David Morse, the actor who played George Washington, for the first time, David McCullough remarked, “When I went up to meet George Washington my heart almost stopped. He looks exactly like we know George

¹⁰¹ The Making of John Adams

Washington looked.”¹⁰² For the role, David Morse donned a prosthetic nose, which created an uncanny resemblance between him and what we know George Washington looked like from paintings and descriptions. McCullough describes Adams as standing “five feet seven or eight inches—about “middle size” for that day—and though verging on portly, he had a straight-up, square-shouldered stance and was, in fact, surprisingly fit and solid.”¹⁰³ Paul Giamatti is not your typical leading man, but his looks and figure fit well with Adams’ description and he captivates the audience through his passionate soliloquys instead of his looks. Laura Linney, Stephen Dillane and Tom Wilkinson are also great as Abigail Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin. The selection of top-notch actors who look much like the men and women they are portraying by the casting department and the attention to detail from the costume and makeup department come together to create a world in which the viewer is fully convinced that these are in fact, John and Abigail Adams and the rest of the Founding Fathers that they are watching on screen.

As the miniseries spans Adams’ life after 1770, it takes the viewers from Braintree, Boston, and Philadelphia, to Paris, London, and Amsterdam. Coming up with an authentic looking set for all of these vastly different places could have been easy to dismiss for budgetary and time reasons. However, the filmmakers realized how important it would be for viewers to feel like they were really in the eighteenth century, and so they did an amazing job of researching what these places would have looked like back then and creating authentic looking sets that matched each

¹⁰² The Making of John Adams

¹⁰³ McCullough, *John Adams*, 18.

distinct setting's history and how their distinctness affected the provincial Americans. By shooting all of the European scenes in Hungary, the filmmakers also made it easier for the actors to act like they were entering a place where they felt out of their element, as Adams did in Europe, because the actors really were outsiders to the location.

They shot all of the American scenes in Virginia, including Colonial Williamsburg, which hasn't been used as a film setting since 1957.¹⁰⁴ Tom Hanks said of the historical benefit of shooting in Colonial Williamsburg, "Everywhere you look, you see the way it was back then: the buildings are the same, the width of the roads are the same, the lack of buildings on the horizon."¹⁰⁵ For the sake of historical preservation, they had to completely recreate the two presidential birth-houses at the Braintree farm and the Piecefield estate, but they got all of the details, right down to the furniture in each room, right; even doing research from their letters on what kinds of crops they were growing and then planting those crops. All of this attention to the authenticity of setting brings the viewer into the world of the eighteenth century with a much greater understanding of what it was really like. Seeing the simple beauty of the Braintree farm and the look of joy on Adams' face from digging his hands through a pile of manure with his son makes it easier for the viewer to understand why Adams hated sitting through Congress meetings with pompous men in a stuffy room in Philadelphia.

In addition to the setting, the filmmakers did a wonderful job of including small details regarding eighteenth century life that often goes overlooked in other

¹⁰⁴ The Making of John Adams

¹⁰⁵ The Making of John Adams

historical films or in our textbooks. We know from paintings and writings that it was in vogue for men to wear wigs, often powdered or tied off with a bow, but rarely in film have we seen these men coming home to their families and having their wives take their coats and wigs off of them to hang up. Seeing John Adams itch his bald head is funny in a way that reminds us that these men were not what their stately portraits make them out to be. Tom Hooper, the director, made sure to intervene whenever someone in makeup or another department tried to make someone look “pretty.” Main characters and extras were told not to wash their hair and their teeth were painted with a gunk that made their smiles a more authentic yellow and black color.¹⁰⁶ Over the span of the series, John and Abigail Adams’ teeth are portrayed as getting worse and worse over time, as was normal for the period.

Another detail that changed over time in the series and with each character was the fashion. Donna Zakowska, the Costume Designer, said, “The way that I really began was looking at paintings. There’s no video, television, anything, and it’s essentially through the paintings, and through the very few, real garments that exist.”¹⁰⁷ The differences between the characters’ costumes really help the viewer understand the difference between multiple cultures throughout the series. It was not just the language-barrier that made it hard for John Adams to get along in France, but his simple, Puritan-based values were in stark contrast to the flamboyant French. In another example, the way Thomas Jefferson and other Southern, plantation-owning delegates dress compared to John Adams and the New England men at the Constitutional Convention speaks volumes about their

¹⁰⁶ The Making of John Adams

¹⁰⁷ The Making of John Adams

disparities. Jefferson appears in light, pastel colors made with silk and gold trimmings. Up until he travels to France, Adams appears in mostly all grey or brown, cloth material. This noticeable difference highlights the less flashy and Puritan character of Adams compared to the large plantation-owning Jefferson. Their difference in opinion comes from the fact that they are from completely different worlds and backgrounds.

We know that it was difficult to start a revolution, gain independence, and form a new government in the eighteenth century, but the filmmakers do a great job of demonstrating to the viewers how hard it was just to be alive at the time. While John Adams is shown busily helping draft the Declaration of Independence and procuring the vote for independence, Abigail is making the hard decision to have she and the children inoculated to prevent smallpox. The doctor provides ample warning to Abigail that she will be infecting her children with the live virus and that there is a chance they could die, but Abigail bravely goes on protecting her family from the epidemic while her husband is away, and the resulting scene is not for the squeamish. In the first episode, Join or Die, a customs official is seen being tarred and feathered by a mob in Boston. This brutal act is an example of the mob violence that was happening in colonial Massachusetts in the 1760s and 1770s because of taxes Parliament levied out. An even more gut-wrenching scene than these, was when Nabby, John's only daughter, had to have a mastectomy to try to stop her breast cancer from spreading. In this scene, Nabby is shown being held down by two men while Dr. Benjamin Rush, one of Adams' closest friends, inserts a piece of wood in her mouth for her to bite down on. It's hard to imagine the excruciating

pain she is going through in a time with no anesthesia, but it demonstrates to the viewer how much John Adams cares about his family, seeing him cry and pace the floor downstairs. After presenting him as a strict father throughout the series, they show that deep down he is a compassionate and caring man with his family.

A New Portrayal of Adams

Through this series, Americans gain a better appreciation for what John Adams and his family did for the creation of our country and for the protection of it in its youth. Starting with the Continental Congress, the filmmakers make an effort, albeit sometimes exaggerating, to express the major contributions that Adams made to our country which are often overlooked in textbooks or in public history. Although we now put great stock in the Declaration of Independence's inspiring words, it is important to note that at the time, Adams saw the document as merely words derived from what they had all spoken about over the past months.¹⁰⁸

John Adams' crowning political moment in the entire series comes when he single-handedly convinces Congress to pass a unanimous vote for independence. In a goose-bump raising scene before the vote, he cries out to Congress in a passionate voice, "My judgment approves this measure, and my whole heart is in it. All that I have, all that I am, and all that I hope in this life, I am now ready to stake upon it. While I live, let me have a country, a free country."¹⁰⁹ The effect the speech has on the other delegates is mesmerizing, but it is important to note that there is no

¹⁰⁸ Gordon S. Wood, *Revolutionary Characters: What Made the Founders Different* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), 176.

¹⁰⁹ John Adams: Independence

record of what Adams said that day in Congress, so the filmmakers have taken historic liberty with this scene.¹¹⁰

Although Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, it is clear that the filmmakers wanted to show Adams as the voice behind it, and the man most responsible for making it happen. It is exaggerated, because they don't show anyone else speak in Congress except Adams and his adversaries, but there is truth to the fact that Adams was most responsible for procuring the vote. There is no transcription or record of what Adams said on July 1, 1776 in his last push for the independence vote, but later, Jefferson would write that Adams was "our colossus on the floor," and Benjamin Rush that, "Every member of Congress in 1776 acknowledged him to be the first man in the House."¹¹¹ It is John Adams' poor luck that a transcription of his speech wasn't copied down, or his words may have made him more appreciated or recognized in history. This example of Adams as the "voice" of the Revolution is one that was lacking in old portrayals of the man, because there are no concrete quotations.

In the sixth episode, Unnecessary War, Adams says to Abigail over dinner, "I desire no other inscription over my gravestone than 'Here lies John Adams, who took upon himself the responsibility for peace with France, in the year 1800.'"¹¹² Under great amounting pressure from his own political party and most popular sentiment in the country after the XYZ Affair, Adams went against his own party's interests by doing his best to avoid an all-out war with France.

¹¹⁰ McCullough, *John Adams*, 127.

¹¹¹ McCullough, *John Adams*, 163.

¹¹² John Adams: Unnecessary War

They portray him as a man wiser than his younger cabinet members, who are clearly not from the same time as him, and don't take the fragility of their young nation seriously enough. He is shown arguing with them about doing what is right for the United States, while they would do what is right for the Federalist Party. War would weaken their economy before they had even finished paying off their Revolutionary War debts, and worsen the already troubling factions, which could split the country.¹¹³ He is also shown arguing with Jefferson, the head of the Republican Party, who is a French supporter, because Jefferson believes Adams is Hamilton's Federalist, war-hungry puppet after he signs the Alien and Sedition Acts. In the episode, Adams says to Jefferson, "Well, I am a party of one, Thomas, as you well know...I am determined to control events, not be controlled by them."¹¹⁴ This act of preventing a full-out war with France was Adams' greatest accomplishment as President of the United States, but was the dagger in his political career, because it split his party. The sixth episode does a tremendous job of presenting Adams as a man willing to take a great personal hit in order to preserve the country that he fought so hard to help create. It is also an example of how the series reflects upon the shifting focus of historians analyzing Adams' intentions, instead of his failed political career.

Like for other men and women of the time, the only surviving testaments to their character are the surviving letters and diaries. A smart way in which the filmmakers and especially the screenwriter bring history alive through this series is

¹¹³ Edmund S. Morgan, *The Meaning of Independence: John Adams, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson* (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 1976), 23.

¹¹⁴ John Adams: Unnecessary War

by having much of the written dialogue taken directly from Adams' and others' letters and diaries, expressing their sentiments and feelings. Adams wrote one of his most famous letters to Abigail in 1780, while he was in France for the first time. He talked about the beauty, art, and culture of Paris, but added,

"I must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history, naval architecture, navigation, commerce, and agriculture in order to give their children a right to study paintings, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry, and porcelain."¹¹⁵

In the series, Adams is at a dinner party with Franklin and a group of French high-society, when a woman asks him if he will attend the opera, to which he responds with gumption, saying his famous quote on what he must do instead, so that the future generations of Americans can enjoy such luxuries. There are countless examples like this one throughout the series of dialogue taken from letters, which allows the viewer to feel the power of these people's words more so than if you were reading them. This does, however, tamper with historical accuracy, because it gives the impression that Adams has said this line to a room full of French people, which took courage and nerve. They receive the line well in the episode, but that does not mean they would not have perhaps been offended in real life. In reality, this quote was a letter written in confidence to his wife, and he did not have to fear the reception of it.

Another theme that the filmmakers of this series wanted to get across about Adams and his family was that they sacrificed so much for the service of others. The number one entity that Adams sacrificed was time: time away from his farm and

¹¹⁵ McCullough, *John Adams*, 236-237.

time away from his beloved wife and family. In the series, Adams is away from Braintree at the Continental Congress in 1774 and 1775-1777, while Abigail maintains the farm and the children's rearing and education all by herself. When he returns home after Independence is agreed upon, Abigail is relieved and comments, "you realize John, it's been fourteen years since we were married? Not more than half of that time have we had the joy of living together."¹¹⁶ Adams understands the strain it has brought on his family, especially while the country has been at war right in his family's backyard. His decision to then accept the position in France to negotiate an alliance treaty came as a shock to Abigail in the series, and put a strain on their marriage, but John saw it as his duty and of the utmost importance. The angry tears streaming down Abigail's face as she scrubs the floor, barely saying goodbye to her husband, shows how tired she is growing of his absence. His decision to bring John Quincy, as the oldest son, also made his other children mad, especially Charles, who later on in life resents his father very much and dies of alcoholism.

Like at the Adams National Historical Park, some parts of Adams' life are glossed over in order to make him more likeable. His attitude toward his children is one of them. There is some foreshadowing of Charles' fate in the early episodes. While John Quincy is shown reading in the background, John will sometimes randomly yell at Charles for being too playful or rambunctious. When he dies in the last episode, John refuses to blame himself, and like in real life, he never speaks of Charles again. As aforementioned in Chapter I, John would from then on remind his

¹¹⁶ John Adams: Don't Tread on Me

children that happiness was more important than success, hinting at the fact that he did blame himself. This sentiment is not expressed in the series. Also, Thomas is portrayed in the series completely inaccurately. He is never shown to marry or have children, and he serves as his father's friend and confidant, living with his parents happily. Of course, history shows that Thomas was a failure in law, and became an alcoholic who moved back into the Old House because he could not independently support his family.

Adams abroad cannot function well without Abigail, as he blunders many political matters, and so she joins him in Paris after five years of separation. When he returns to America in 1788, he is 53. It is the first time in nine years that the entire family is together, and he doesn't even recognize his youngest son, Thomas. While Adams was in Europe feeling sometimes like his duties were pointless, other men were back in America debating the most important matters of the day, like the drafting and passing of the new Constitution. Adams missed many political opportunities, which he was not happy about, but he still always looked at the big picture and saw the importance of being the first U.S. Ambassador to Great Britain. Adams' bravest example of sacrifice was his tireless effort to avoid all-out war with France, which resulted in him losing the election of 1800 to Jefferson, as the Federalist Party split their votes, and which Adams decided he could care less about, because he was so proud of avoiding the war which he saw unnecessary. Last but not least, it is often easy to forget that the men who signed the Declaration of Independence were all committing treason in the eyes of the English, and that they all risked their lives for what they believed. If any of them were caught, they would

have been hanged. In Independence, Franklin says, “We will now all hang together, or most assuredly we will all hang separately.”¹¹⁷ Adams time and time again proved that he valued American independence and the endurance of it above all else in life.

Little doubt can be had when watching this series that Adams was a great man, but that does not mean that he is depicted as a perfect man. Adams was known to be vain, hot-tempered, and to always speak whatever came to his mind, a lot of times in an insulting way, which became a detriment to whatever he was trying to accomplish. The filmmakers did not hide the fact. In the spirit of the shifting focus away from glorification of the Founding Fathers, they embraced Adams’ faults and exhibited that he could not have accomplished what he did without some sort of temper, or without his vanity and desperate need to become a great man.

If there’s one thing every Adams historian and many of Adams’ peers can agree on, it is that he was greatly flawed. Edmund S. Morgan wrote, “Indeed, with all his other shortcomings went a palpable, potent, and pathetic vanity. John Adams was one of the most vainest men who ever lived. He had an almost psychopathic yearning to be thought a great man by everybody.”¹¹⁸ Franklin described Adams by saying he was a man who “means well for his Country, is always an honest Man, often a Wise One, but sometimes and in some things, absolutely out of his senses.”¹¹⁹ When frustrated that someone did not see eye-to-eye with him, Adams would

¹¹⁷ John Adams: Independence

¹¹⁸ Morgan, *The Meaning of Independence*, 9.

¹¹⁹ Wood, *Revolutionary Characters*, 177.

become angry and insult them. In Independence, Adams' main political adversary is John Dickinson, co-author of the Olive Branch Petition and Quaker delegate from Pennsylvania, whose main goal is not independence but reconciliation with Great Britain. In one scene, Adams says, "I sit in judgment of no man's religion, Mr. Dickinson, but your Quaker sensibilities do us a gross disservice. It is one thing to turn the other cheek, but to lie down in the ground, like a snake, and crawl..."¹²⁰ These words are taken as highly offensive and it was not a smart, diplomatic move by Adams. This is also another example of a time when words never used by Adams are included in his dialogue, but Adams did feel this way towards Dickinson, and it's a way that the filmmakers can demonstrate this. It's interesting how the filmmakers make sure his temper comes alive at certain moments, but that he is never too cruel. It is always caused by his passion and ambition.

Adams' Relevance in Today's America

The first episode, Join or Die, begins with the Boston Massacre, which took place on March 5, 1770, and became the name famous for an incident in which British soldiers opened fire on a crowd of civilians, killing five. It added fuel to the fire of Boston opposition to the Townshend Acts of 1767 and the increased troop presence in Massachusetts in 1768.¹²¹ When asked to defend Captain Preston and his soldiers, because no one else will plead their case, Adams weighs the choice heavily before agreeing to defend them. He wants to accept it because, in his opinion, every man in a free country deserves council. In an exchange with Abigail, she says, "They will say you are the Crown's man," and he responds, "I care not for

¹²⁰ John Adams: Independence

¹²¹ McCullough, *John Adams*, 65.

malicious tongues on either sides.”¹²² The filmmakers are getting at the core of one of Adams’ strongest beliefs, the rule of law. Adams cares about the welfare of his practice, but he is willing to risk it, like he will do a countless amount of times in the future, to defend his belief in the justice system.

Perhaps the filmmakers’ decisions as to how they portrayed John Adams in Join or Die, and particularly his unwavering defense of the legal rights of every human being, no matter what side of current popular debate they were on, above all else, were influenced by legal debates from the past decade. One of our nation’s proudest examples of liberty is our justice system, which many believe to be the fairest in the world. That everyone is entitled to the same basic human rights and fair trial has been debated, however, when it comes to suspected terrorists at Guantanamo Bay detention camp who have been tried under military tribunals instead of civilian federal court. The overwhelming feeling that we need to protect ourselves from violations such as the horrific events that took place on September 11 have lead to these decisions. Many human rights activists have argued that trying prisoners under military tribunals violates their basic human rights. There is a parallel between them and John Adams. John Adams didn’t necessarily like his clients, but he believed they deserved a fair trial under the court of law and not under the court of public opinion. Most Americans do not want to see Khalid Sheikh Mohammed a free man, but it takes a brave and reasonable person to speak out against popular opinion on such a sensitive issue. There has even been debate over whether an American attorney should be accused of treason if they defend a

¹²² John Adams: Join or Die

terrorist detainee. This Boston Massacre example also goes along well with Adams' character throughout the series, as someone who would always go against popular opinion if he truly thinks it is the right thing to do, even if it would cost him dearly.

This series came out during the historic 2008 election. It is a little ironic to think that someone with a character and personality like John Adams would never be considered or suited for public office today. His inability to get along with others would not enable him to schmooze up to donors and his "party of one" attitude would insure that he wouldn't have the backing of either major party. The word "politician," today has a pejorative tone, and although many begin their careers wanting to be of public service to do good or to change citizens' lives for the better, they quickly realize that it is harder to stand up for what you believe in when you have to please people in order to get elected. Adams was the first casualty of this problem in America.

The only affair that troubled Adams during his time as President was the XYZ Affair. Although there are many genuinely family-oriented politicians in our country today, it is too common that a sexual scandal becomes public knowledge; discrediting everything that politician has ever stood for. The politician's affair has become a cliché in America. This is why John and Abigail's relationship is viewed as all the more remarkable to viewers today. The filmmakers present the couple as a complete tag-team. Throughout the series, Adams consults with Abigail, his "dearest friend," on all his political decisions, and she offers sound advice, which he takes seriously and often follows. Adams struggled to make good decisions when they were apart, and often referred to her as his "ballast." She was the voice of

reason inside his head. While in France, Adams and Franklin could not see eye to eye on the matter of the best approach in diplomacy. Franklin tells him, "What are you thinking of? A good diplomat, Mr. Adams, observes much, acts little, and speaks softly."¹²³ Adams does not take Franklin's advice seriously, but once Abigail arrives in France, he is much more civil toward people. He listens to her judge of character and her advice on how to act toward certain people. They are very much each other's equals in their relationship.

The filmmakers do not hide the other founders' sexual indiscretions. Franklin's affair with Madame Helvetius in France comes to light when Adams walks in on them in the bathtub together, which is a rather shocking scene for him. Adams also learns of Jefferson's affair with Sally Hemings in a newspaper column, and Sally is later shown crying at Jefferson's deathbed. With all of the improprieties and temptations in France, for all accounts, Adams was more appalled by this scandalous behavior than tempted by it. He wrote to Abigail, "I cannot help suspecting that the more elegance, the less virtue in all times and countries."¹²⁴ Adams would not have been able to accomplish what he did without his "ballast." In The Making of John Adams, Tom Hanks even compares John and Abigail's love to that of Romeo and Juliet. The filmmakers even included a sex scene in the series, when Abigail returns to John in Paris after five years of separation, hammering at the image of the perfect couple in love.

Adams' story as presented in John Adams also resonates with viewers in America today, because we live in a post-September 11 world and we have soldiers

¹²³ John Adams: Don't Tread on Me

¹²⁴ McCullough, *John Adams*, 192.

overseas risking their lives to protect America and defend its values. Although nationalistic fervor has died down since its dramatic rise in the first years after that tragic day, any story told of an American who is willing to sacrifice so much for his country, will be received with great interest. As 2.7 million Americans gathered around their televisions to watch the premiere of this HBO mini-series, they were treated to a mostly accurate representation of who the man, John Adams was. They also got to know the other Founding Fathers as modern historians like David McCullough, Joseph J. Ellis, Gordon S. Wood, and Edmund S. Morgan, have portrayed them. Long gone are the days when historians pretend that these men were Gods, and this series demonstrates that.

Epilogue: Monuments Will Never Be Erected to Me

When John Adams first arrived in France in 1778 as an American diplomat, he was asked many times, whether or not he was the famous Adams. They were, sadly enough for Adams, referring to his cousin Samuel. Adams was left to ponder his own image, writing, “a Man of whom Nobody had ever heard before, a perfect Cypher, a Man who did not understand a Word of French—awkward in his Figure—awkward in his Dress—no Abilities—a perfect Bigot—and fanatic.”¹²⁵ This first realization for Adams that he would be forgotten in history bothered him for the rest of his life. More so, however, he was bothered by what he predicted as the fate of the telling of the American Revolution. A brilliant scene in the last episode of the HBO mini-series shows Adams’ reaction to John Trumbull’s *Declaration of Independence*. He tells Trumbull, “It is bad history.” When Trumbull replies that the artist must not be denied a certain license, Adams snaps back, saying, “Do not let our posterity be deluded with fictions under the guise of poetical or graphical license...I consider the true history of the American Revolution, as lost.”¹²⁶ The scene is fictional, but these sentiments were expressed in Adams’ twilight years through his letters, and seem to predict how historians would begin to remember the Revolutionary time as a nostalgic one, and not as Adams saw it, a trying one.

Adams would most likely be pleasantly surprised to know that he has finally been mentioned amongst the likes of Washington, Jefferson, and Franklin, as our

¹²⁵ Joseph J. Ellis, *Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993), 11-12.

¹²⁶ John Adams: Piecefield

greatest Founding Fathers. He wrote to his friend Benjamin Rush in 1809, “Mausoleums, statues, monuments will never be erected to me...Panegyrical romances will never be written, nor flattering orations spoken, to transmit me to posterity in brilliant colors.”¹²⁷ Since the spike in Adams’ popularity, people have begun to wonder why Adams was right about this. Journalist Alexander Heffner has written, “If George Washington was the sword of the revolution and Thomas Jefferson the pen, why have we neglected the voice of our nation’s independence?”¹²⁸ Peter Roff has echoed Heffner’s question, writing, “He deserves a better memorial than what the nation has thus far provided to him—perhaps, as historian and Adams expert David McCullough once suggested to me, some kind of garden, on or near the National Mall containing a statue as well as the presentations of some of his most famous writings.”¹²⁹ In fact, there was already a stirring by family members and politicians to get this in motion.

On November 5, 2001, Congress passed an act “To authorize the Adams Memorial Foundation to establish a commemorative work on Federal land in the District of Columbia and its environs to honor former President John Adams and his legacy.”¹³⁰ In 2003, however, the Commemorative Works Act was amended so that no further construction along the Mall can happen, as the Mall is “a completed work

¹²⁷ Alexander Heffner. “Why doesn’t John Adams have a memorial?” *The Washington Post*, 1 July 2011.

¹²⁸ Heffner. “Why doesn’t John Adams have a memorial?” *The Washington Post*.

¹²⁹ Peter Roff, “John Adams Deserves a Monument in Washington,” U.S. News: Opinion, entry posted 11 July 2011.

¹³⁰ U.S. Congress. Public Law 107-62. 115 Stat. 411. 107th Congress. November 5, 2001.

of civic art,” according to the National Park Service.¹³¹ The Adams Memorial has an official website, adamsmemorial.org, which explains that there will be an Adams Memorial built in Washington, D.C., and that, at the charge of Ben Adams, descendant and head of the Adams Memorial Foundation, a location is being sought out. There is still a chance that an Adams Memorial could be found close to the White House, at Freedom Plaza or nearby, but it does not look likely that he will be in the same space as Jefferson, Washington, and Lincoln. Maybe this is a good thing for John Adams. Perhaps it will be more fitting for his legacy if the memorial is different in style, as well. It can take decades for an actual memorial to be built, because of different designs, funding, and government authorization, but it will be interesting to see whether or not, and how, Adams will be remembered in our nation’s capital.

¹³¹ Heffner. “Why doesn’t John Adams have a memorial?” *The Washington Post*.

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