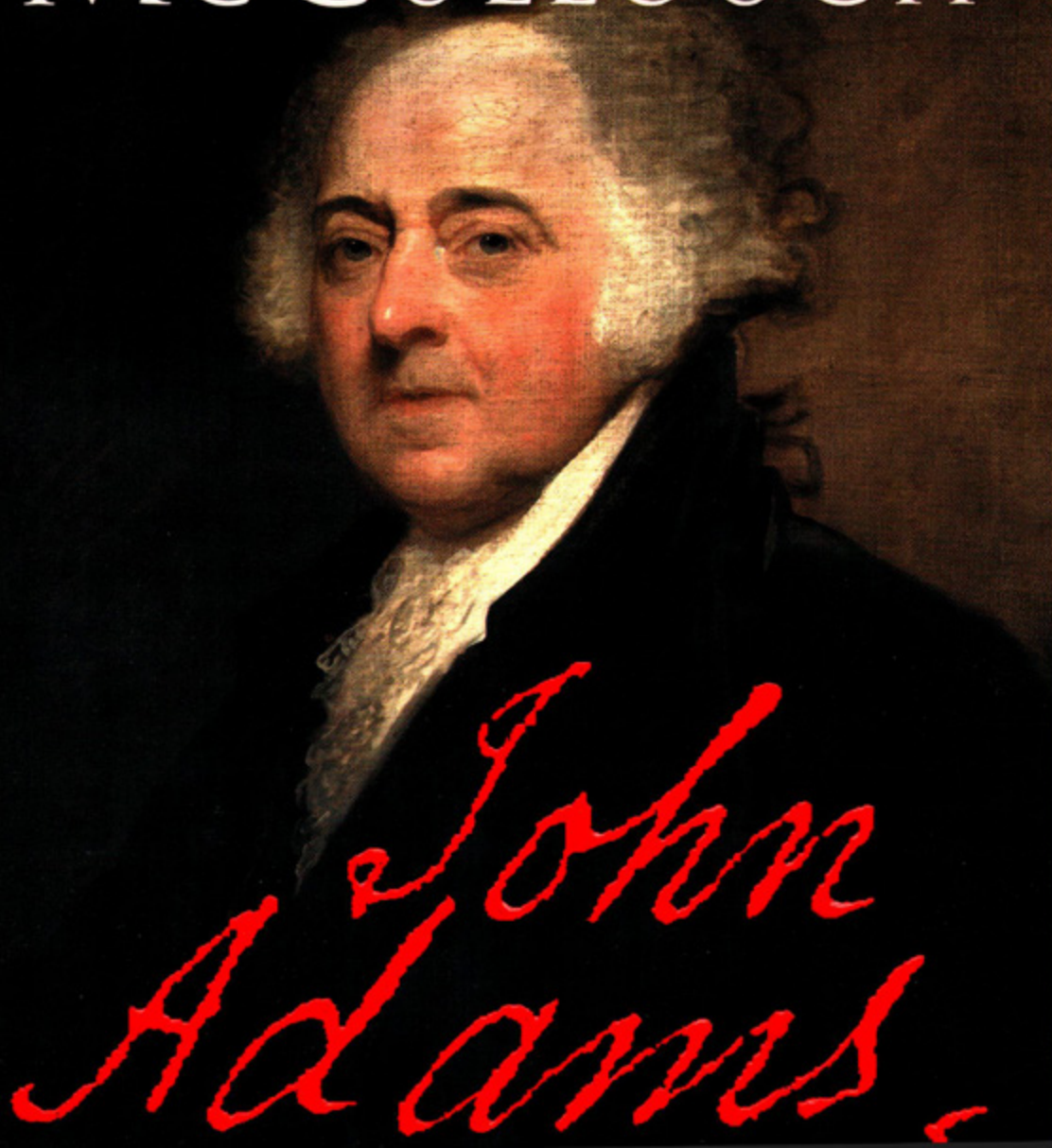


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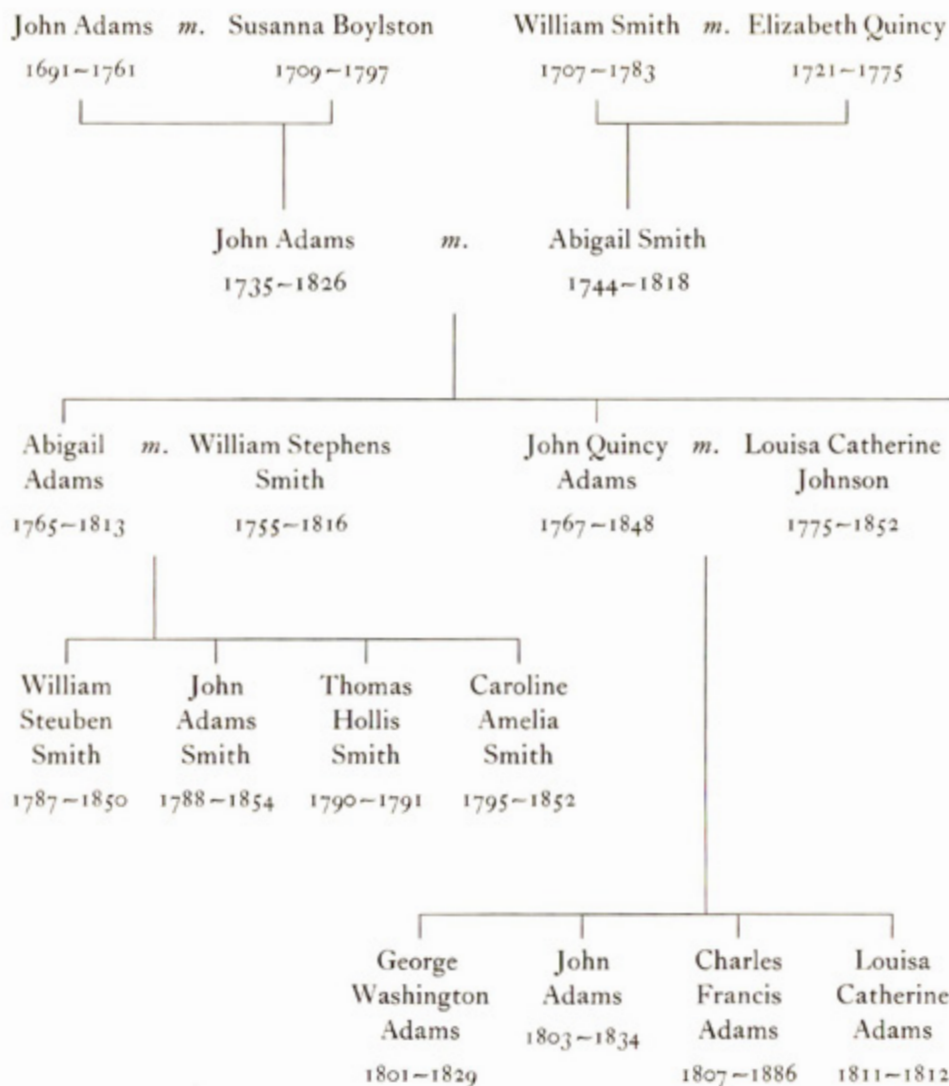
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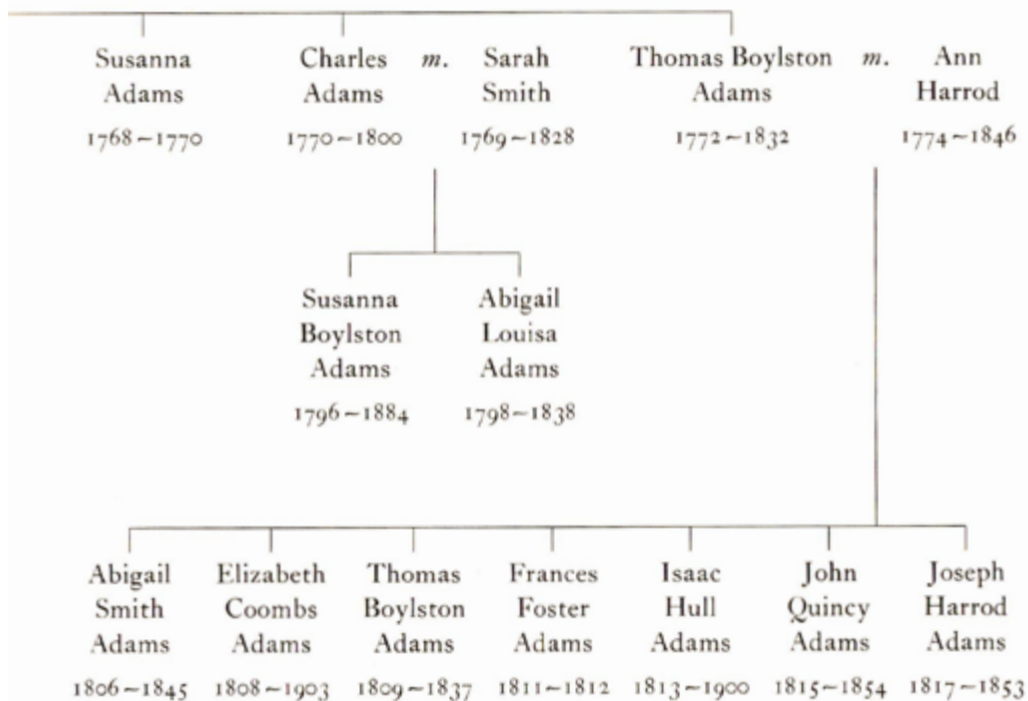
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# *Adams Family Tree*

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*We* live, my dear soul, in an age of trial. What will be the consequence, I know not.

—John Adams to Abigail Adams, 1774

## PART I

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# Revolution



*But what do we mean by the American Revolution? Do we mean the American war? The Revolution was effected before the war commenced. The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people.*

—John Adams

*I have heard of one Mr. Adams but who is the other?*

—King George III

## THE ROAD TO PHILADELPHIA

*You cannot be, I know, nor do I wish to see you, an inactive spectator. . . . We have too many high sounding words, and too few actions that correspond with them.*

—Abigail Adams

## I

**I**N THE COLD, nearly colorless light of a New England winter, two men on horseback traveled the coast road below Boston, heading north. A foot or more of snow covered the landscape, the remnants of a Christmas storm that had blanketed Massachusetts from one end of the province to the other. Beneath the snow, after weeks of severe cold, the ground was frozen solid to a depth of two feet. Packed ice in the road, ruts as hard as iron, made the going hazardous, and the riders, mindful of the horses, kept at a walk.

Nothing about the harsh landscape differed from other winters. Nor was there anything to distinguish the two riders, no signs of rank or title, no liveried retinue bringing up the rear. It might have been any year and they could have been anybody braving the weather for any number of reasons. Dressed as they were in heavy cloaks, their hats pulled low against the wind, they were barely distinguishable even from each other, except that the older, stouter of the two did most of the talking.

He was John Adams of Braintree and he loved to talk. He was a known talker. There were some, even among his admirers, who wished he talked less. He himself wished he talked less, and he had particular regard for those, like General Washington, who somehow managed great reserve under almost any circumstance.

John Adams was a lawyer and a farmer, a graduate of Harvard College, the husband of Abigail Smith Adams, the father of four children. He was forty years old and he was a revolutionary.

Dismounted, he stood five feet seven or eight inches tall—about “middle size” in that day—and though verging on portly, he had a straight-up, square-shouldered stance and was, in fact, surprisingly fit and solid. His hands were the hands of a man accustomed to pruning his own trees, cutting his own hay, and splitting his own firewood.

In such bitter cold of winter, the pink of his round, clean-shaven, very English face would all but glow, and if he were hatless or without a wig, his high forehead and thinning hairline made the whole of the face look rounder still. The hair, light brown in color, was full about the ears. The chin was firm, the nose sharp, almost birdlike. But it was the dark, perfectly arched brows and keen blue eyes that gave the face its vitality. Years afterward, recalling this juncture in his life, he would describe himself as looking rather like a short, thick Archbishop of Canterbury.

As befitting a studious lawyer from Braintree, Adams was a “plain dressing” man. His oft-stated pleasures were his family, his farm, his books and writing table, a convivial pipe and cup of coffee (now that tea was no longer acceptable), or preferably a glass of good Madeira.

In the warm seasons he relished long walks and time alone on horseback. Such exercise, he believed, roused “the animal spirits” and “dispersed melancholy.” He loved the open meadows of home, the “old acquaintances” of rock ledges and breezes from the sea. From his doorstep to the water’s edge was approximately a mile.

He was a man who cared deeply for his friends, who, with few exceptions, were to be his friends for life, and in some instances despite severe strains. And to no one was he more devoted than to his wife, Abigail. She was his “Dearest Friend,” as he addressed her in letters—his “best, dearest, worthiest, wisest friend in the world”—while to her he was “the tenderest of husbands,” her “good man.”

John Adams was also, as many could attest, a great-hearted, persevering man of uncommon ability and force. He had a brilliant mind. He was honest and everyone knew it. Emphatically independent by nature, hardworking, frugal—all traits in the New England tradition—he was anything but cold or laconic as supposedly New Englanders were. He could be high-spirited and affectionate, vain, cranky, impetuous, self-

absorbed, and fiercely stubborn; passionate, quick to anger, and all-forgiving; generous and entertaining. He was blessed with great courage and good humor, yet subject to spells of despair, and especially when separated from his family or during periods of prolonged inactivity.

Ambitious to excel—to make himself known—he had nonetheless recognized at an early stage that happiness came not from fame and fortune, “and all such things,” but from “an habitual contempt of them,” as he wrote. He prized the Roman ideal of honor, and in this, as in much else, he and Abigail were in perfect accord. Fame without honor, in her view, would be “like a faint meteor gliding through the sky, shedding only transient light.”

As his family and friends knew, Adams was both a devout Christian and an independent thinker, and he saw no conflict in that. He was hard-headed and a man of “sensibility,” a close observer of human folly as displayed in everyday life and fired by an inexhaustible love of books and scholarly reflection. He read Cicero, Tacitus, and others of his Roman heroes in Latin, and Plato and Thucydides in the original Greek, which he considered the supreme language. But in his need to fathom the “labyrinth” of human nature, as he said, he was drawn to Shakespeare and Swift, and likely to carry Cervantes or a volume of English poetry with him on his journeys. “You will never be alone with a poet in your pocket,” he would tell his son Johnny.

John Adams was not a man of the world. He enjoyed no social standing. He was an awkward dancer and poor at cards. He never learned to flatter. He owned no ships or glass factory as did Colonel Josiah Quincy, Braintree’s leading citizen. There was no money in his background, no Adams fortune or elegant Adams homestead like the Boston mansion of John Hancock.

It was in the courtrooms of Massachusetts and on the printed page, principally in the newspapers of Boston, that Adams had distinguished himself. Years of riding the court circuit and his brilliance before the bar had brought him wide recognition and respect. And of greater consequence in recent years had been his spirited determination and eloquence in the cause of American rights and liberties.

That he relished the sharp conflict and theater of the courtroom, that he loved the esteem that came with public life, no less than he loved “my farm, my family and goose quill,” there is no doubt, however frequently



he protested to the contrary. His desire for "distinction" was too great. Patriotism burned in him like a blue flame. "I have a zeal at my heart for my country and her friends which I cannot smother or conceal," he told Abigail, warning that it could mean privation and unhappiness for his family unless regulated by cooler judgment than his own.

In less than a year's time, as a delegate to the Continental Congress at Philadelphia, he had emerged as one of the most "sensible and forcible" figures in the whole patriot cause, the "Great and Common Cause," his influence exceeding even that of his better-known kinsman, the ardent Boston patriot Samuel Adams.

He was a second cousin of Samuel Adams, but "possessed of another species of character," as his Philadelphia friend Benjamin Rush would explain. "He saw the whole of a subject at a glance, and . . . was equally fearless of men and of the consequences of a bold assertion of his opinion. . . . He was a stranger to dissimulation."

It had been John Adams, in the aftermath of Lexington and Concord, who rose in the Congress to speak of the urgent need to save the New England army facing the British at Boston and in the same speech called on Congress to put the Virginian George Washington at the head of the army. That was now six months past. The general had since established a command at Cambridge, and it was there that Adams was headed. It was his third trip in a week to Cambridge, and the beginning of a much longer undertaking by horseback. He would ride on to Philadelphia, a journey of nearly 400 miles that he had made before, though never in such punishing weather or at so perilous an hour for his country.

The man riding with him was Joseph Bass, a young shoemaker and Braintree neighbor hired temporarily as servant and traveling companion.

The day was Wednesday, January 24, 1776. The temperature, according to records kept by Adams's former professor of science at Harvard, John Winthrop, was in the low twenties. At the least, the trip would take two weeks, given the condition of the roads and Adams's reluctance to travel on the Sabbath.

TO ABIGAIL ADAMS, who had never been out of Massachusetts, the province of Pennsylvania was "that far country," unimaginably distant,

and their separations, lasting months at a time, had become extremely difficult for her.

"Winter makes its approaches fast," she had written to John in November. "I hope I shall not be obliged to spend it without my dearest friend. . . . I have been like a nun in a cloister ever since you went away."

He would never return to Philadelphia without her, he had vowed in a letter from his lodgings there. But they each knew better, just as each understood the importance of having Joseph Bass go with him. The young man was a tie with home, a familiar home-face. Once Adams had resettled in Philadelphia, Bass would return home with the horses, and bring also whatever could be found of the "common small" necessities impossible to obtain now, with war at the doorstep.

Could Bass bring her a bundle of pins? Abigail had requested earlier, in the bloody spring of 1775. She was entirely understanding of John's "arduous task." Her determination that he play his part was quite as strong as his own. They were of one and the same spirit. "You cannot be, I know, nor do I wish to see you, an inactive spectator," she wrote at her kitchen table. "We have too many high sounding words, and too few actions that correspond with them." Unlike the delegates at Philadelphia, she and the children were confronted with the reality of war every waking hour. For though British troops were bottled up in Boston, the British fleet commanded the harbor and the sea and thus no town by the shore was safe from attack. Those Braintree families who were able to leave had already packed and moved inland, out of harm's way. Meanwhile, shortages of sugar, coffee, pepper, shoes, and ordinary pins were worse than he had any idea.

"The cry for pins is so great that what we used to buy for 7 shillings and six pence are now 20 shillings and not to be had for that." A bundle of pins contained six thousand, she explained. These she could sell for hard money or use for barter.

There had been a rush of excitement when the British sent an expedition to seize hay and livestock on one of the islands offshore. "The alarm flew [like] lightning," Abigail reported, "men from all parts came flocking down till 2,000 were collected." The crisis had passed, but not her state of nerves, with the house so close to the road and the comings and goings of soldiers. They stopped at her door for food and slept on her kitchen floor. Pewter spoons were melted for bullets in her fireplace.

"Sometimes refugees from Boston tired and fatigued, seek an asylum for a day or night, a week," she wrote to John. "You can hardly imagine how we live."

"Pray don't let Bass forget my pins," she reminded him again. "I endeavor to live in the most frugal manner possible, but I am many times distressed."

The day of the battle of Bunker Hill, June 17, 1775, the thunder of the bombardment had been terrifying, even at the distance of Braintree. Earlier, in April, when news came of Lexington and Concord, John, who was at home at the time, had saddled his horse and gone to see for himself, riding for miles along the route of the British march, past burned-out houses and scenes of extreme distress. He knew then what war meant, what the British meant, and warned Abigail that in case of danger she and the children must "fly to the woods." But she was as intent to see for herself as he, and with the bombardment at Bunker Hill ringing in her ears, she had taken seven-year-old Johnny by the hand and hurried up the road to the top of nearby Penn's Hill. From a granite outcropping that breached the summit like the hump of a whale, they could see the smoke of battle rising beyond Boston, ten miles up the bay.

It was the first all-out battle of the war. "How many have fallen we know not," she wrote that night. "The constant roar of the cannon is so distressing that we cannot eat, drink, or sleep."

Their friend Joseph Warren had been killed at Bunker Hill, Abigail reported in another letter. A handsome young physician and leading patriot allied with Samuel Adams and Paul Revere, Warren had been one of the worthiest men of the province. John had known him since the smallpox epidemic of 1764, when John had gone to Boston to be inoculated. Now Joseph Warren was dead at age thirty-four, shot through the face, his body horribly mutilated by British bayonets.

"My bursting heart must find vent at my pen," Abigail told her absent husband.

THE ROUTE JOHN ADAMS and his young companion would take to Philadelphia that January of 1776 was the same as he had traveled to the First Continental Congress in the summer of 1774. They would travel the

Post Road west across Massachusetts as far as Springfield on the Connecticut River, there cross by ferry and swing south along the west bank, down the valley into Connecticut. At Wethersfield they would leave the river for the road to New Haven, and from New Haven on, along the Connecticut shore—through Fairfield, Norwalk, Stamford, Greenwich—they would be riding the New York Post Road. At New York, horses and riders would be ferried over the Hudson River to New Jersey, where they would travel “as fine a road as ever trod,” in the opinion of John Adams, whose first official position in Braintree had been surveyor of roads. Three more ferry crossings, at Hackensack, Newark, and New Brunswick, would put them on a straightaway ride to the little college town of Princeton. Then came Trenton and a final ferry crossing over the Delaware to Pennsylvania. In another twenty miles they would be in sight of Philadelphia.

All told, they would pass through more than fifty towns in five provinces—some twenty towns in Massachusetts alone—stopping several times a day to eat, sleep, or tend the horses. With ice clogging the rivers, there was no estimating how long delays might be at ferry crossings.

Making the journey in 1774, Adams had traveled in style, with the full Massachusetts delegation, everyone in a state of high expectation. He had been a different man then, torn between elation and despair over what might be expected of him. It had been his first chance to see something of the world. His father had lived his entire life in Braintree, and no Adams had ever taken part in public life beyond Braintree. He himself had never set foot out of New England, and many days he suffered intense torment over his ability to meet the demands of the new role to be played. Politics did not come easily to him. He was too independent by nature and his political experience amounted to less than a year’s service in the Massachusetts legislature. But was there anyone of sufficient experience or ability to meet the demands of the moment?

“I wander alone, and ponder. I muse, I mope, I ruminate,” he wrote in the seclusion of his diary. “We have not men fit for the times. We are deficient in genius, education, in travel, fortune—in everything. I feel unutterable anxiety.”

He must prepare for “a long journey indeed,” he had told Abigail.

"But if the length of the journey was all, it would be no burden. . . . Great things are wanted to be done."

He had worried over how he might look in such company and what clothes to take.

I think it will be necessary to make me up a couple of pieces of new linen. I am told they wash miserably at N[ew] York, the Jerseys, and Philadelphia, too, in comparison of Boston, and am advised to carry a great deal of linen.

Whether to make me a suit of new clothes at Boston or to make them at Philadelphia, and what to make I know not.

Still, the prospect of a gathering of such historic portent stirred him as nothing ever had. "It is to be a school of political prophets I suppose—a nursery of American statesmen," he wrote to a friend, James Warren of Plymouth. "May it thrive and prosper and flourish and from this fountain may there issue streams, which shall gladden all the cities and towns in North America, forever."

There had been a rousing send-off in Boston, on August 10, 1774, and in full view of British troops. Samuel Adams, never a fancy dresser, had appeared in a stunning new red coat, new wig, silver-buckled shoes, gold knee buckles, the best silk hose, a spotless new cocked hat on his massive head, and carrying a gold-headed cane, all gifts from the Sons of Liberty. It was thought that as leader of the delegation he should look the part. In addition, they had provided "a little purse" for expenses.

It had been a triumphal, leisurely journey of nearly three weeks, with welcoming parties riding out to greet them at town after town. They were feted and toasted, prayers were said, church bells rang. Silas Deane, a Connecticut delegate who joined the procession, assured John Adams that the Congress was to be the grandest, most important assembly ever held in America. At New Haven "every bell was clanging," people were crowding at doors and windows "as if to see a coronation."

In New York they were shown the sights—City Hall, the college, and at Bowling Green, at the foot of Broadway, the gilded equestrian statue of King George III, which had yet to be pulled from its pedestal by an angry mob. The grand houses and hospitality were such as Adams had never known, even if, as a self-respecting New Englander, he thought

New Yorkers lacking in decorum. "They talk very loud, very fast, and altogether," he observed. "If they ask you a question, before you can utter three words of your answer, they will break out upon you again—and talk away."

Truly he was seeing the large world, he assured Abigail in a letter from the tavern at Princeton, a day's ride from Philadelphia. "Tomorrow we reach the theater of action. God Almighty grant us wisdom and virtue sufficient for the high trust that is devolved upon us."

But that had been nearly two years past. It had been high summer, green and baking hot under summer skies, an entirely different time that now seemed far past, so much had happened since. There had been no war then, no blood had been spilled at Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill. Now fully twenty regiments of red-coated British regulars occupied Boston under General William Howe. British warships, some of 50 guns, lay at anchor in Boston Harbor, while American forces outside the city had become perilously thin.

In the late summer and fall of 1775, the "bloody flux," epidemic dysentery, had ripped through their ranks. Adams's youngest brother, Elihu, a captain of militia, camped beside the Charles River at Cambridge, was stricken and died, leaving a wife and three children. Nor was Braintree spared the violent epidemic. For Abigail, then thirty years old, it had been the worst ordeal of her life.

"Such is the distress of the neighborhood that I can scarcely find a well person to assist me in looking after the sick . . . so mortal a time the oldest man does not remember," she had lamented in a letter to John. "As to politics I know nothing about them. I have wrote as much as I am able to, being very weak."

"Mrs. Randall has lost her daughter, Mrs. Bracket hers, Mr. Thomas Thayer his wife," she reported. "I know of eight this week who have been buried in this town." Parson Wibird was so ill he could scarcely take a step. "We have been four sabbaths without any meeting." Their three-year-old Tommy was so wretchedly sick that "[were] you to look upon him you would not know him." She was constantly scrubbing the house with hot vinegar.

"Woe follows woe, one affliction treads upon the heel of another," she wrote. Some families had lost three, four, and five children. Some families were entirely gone.

The strong clarity of her handwriting, the unhesitating flow of her pen across the paper, line after line, seemed at odds with her circumstances. Rarely was a word crossed out or changed. It was as if she knew exactly what was in her heart and how she wished to express it—as if the very act of writing, of forming letters, in her distinctive angular fashion, keeping every line straight, would somehow help maintain her balance, validate her own being in such times.

She had begun signing herself “Portia,” after the long-suffering, virtuous wife of the Roman statesman Brutus. If her “dearest friend” was to play the part of a Roman hero, so would she.

Her mother lay mortally ill in neighboring Weymouth. When, on October 1, 1775, her mother died, Abigail wrote to John, “You often expressed your anxiety over me when you left me before, surrounded with terrors, but my trouble then was as the small dust in the balance compared to what I have since endured.”

In addition to tending her children, she was nursing a desperately ill servant named Patty. The girl had become “the most shocking object my eyes ever beheld . . . [and] continuously desirous of my being with her the little while she expects to live.” It was all Abigail could do to remain in the same house. When Patty died on October 9, she “made the fourth corpse that was this day committed to the ground.”

Correspondence was maddeningly slow and unreliable. In late October she wrote to say she had not had a line from John in a month and that in his last letter he had made no mention of the six she had written to him. “’Tis only in my night visions that I know anything about you.” Yet in that time he had written seven letters to her, including one mourning the loss of her mother and asking for news of “poor, distressed” Patty.

Heartsick, searching for an answer to why such evil should “befall a city and a people,” Abigail had pondered whether it could be God’s punishment for the sin of slavery.

AT CAMBRIDGE THE MORNING of the bitterly cold first day of the new year, 1776, George Washington had raised the new Continental flag with thirteen stripes before his headquarters and announced that the new army was now “entirely continental.” But for days afterward, their enlistments up, hundreds, thousands of troops, New England militia,

started for home. Replacements had to be found, an immensely difficult and potentially perilous changing of the guard had to be carried off, one army moving out, another moving in, all in the bitter winds and snow of winter and in such fashion as the enemy would never know.

"It is not in the pages of history, perhaps, to furnish a case like ours," Washington informed John Hancock, president of the Continental Congress. Hardly 5,000 colonial troops were fit for duty. Promises of men, muskets, powder, and urgently needed supplies never materialized. Blankets and linen for bandages were "greatly wanted." Firewood was in short supply. With smallpox spreading in Boston, the British command had allowed pathetic columns of the ill-clad, starving poor of Boston to come pouring out of town and into the American lines, many of them sick, and all in desperate need of food and shelter.

"The reflection on my situation and that of this army produces many an unhappy hour when all around me are wrapped in sleep," wrote Washington, who had never before commanded anything larger than a regiment.

The night of January 8, Washington had ordered a brief American assault on Charlestown, largely to keep the British guessing. Adams, at home at his desk writing a letter, was brought to his feet by the sudden crash of the guns, "a very hot fire" of artillery that lasted half an hour and lit the sky over Braintree's north common. Whether American forces were on the attack or defense, he could not tell. "But in either case, I rejoice," he wrote, taking up his pen again, "for defeat appears to me preferable to total inaction."

As it was, Washington saw his situation to be so precarious that the only choice was an all-out attack on Boston, and he wrote to tell Adams, "I am exceedingly desirous of consulting you." As a former delegate to Philadelphia, Washington understood the need to keep Congress informed. Earlier, concerned whether his authority reached beyond Boston to the defense of New York, he had asked Adams for an opinion, and Adams's reply had been characteristically unhesitating and unambiguous: "Your commission constitutes you commander of all the forces . . . and you are vested with full power and authority to act as you shall think for the good and welfare of the service."

No one in Congress had impressed Adams more. On the day he had called on his fellow delegates to put their colleague, "the gentleman from



Virginia," in command at Boston, Washington, out of modesty, had left the chamber, while a look of mortification, as Adams would tell the story, filled the face of John Hancock, who had hoped he would be chosen. Washington was virtuous, brave, and in his new responsibilities, "one of the most important characters in the world," Adams had informed Abigail. "The liberties of America depend upon him in great degree." Later, when she met Washington at a Cambridge reception, Abigail thought John had not said half enough in praise of him.

A council of war with the commander and his generals convened January 16 in the parlor of the large house on Brattle Street, Cambridge, that served as Washington's headquarters. With others of the Massachusetts congressional delegation still at Philadelphia, Adams was the only member of Congress present as Washington made the case for an attack on Boston, by sending his troops across the frozen bay. But the generals flatly rejected the plan and it was put aside.

Two days later, Adams was summoned again. Devastating news had arrived by dispatch rider. An American assault on Quebec led by Colonels Richard Montgomery and Benedict Arnold had failed. The "gallant Montgomery" was dead, "brave Arnold" was wounded. It was a crushing moment for Washington and for John Adams. Congress had ordered the invasion of Canada, the plan was Washington's own, and the troops were mostly New Englanders.

As a young man, struggling over what to make of his life, Adams had often pictured himself as a soldier. Only the previous spring, when Washington appeared in Congress resplendent in the blue-and-buff uniform of a Virginia militia officer, Adams had written to Abigail, "Oh that I was a soldier!" He was reading military books. "Everybody must and will be a soldier," he told her. On the morning Washington departed Philadelphia to assume command at Boston, he and others of the Massachusetts delegation had traveled a short way with the general and his entourage, to a rousing accompaniment of fifes and drums, Adams feeling extremely sorry for himself for having to stay behind to tend what had become the unglamorous labors of Congress. "I, poor creature, worn out with scribbling for my bread and my liberty, low in spirits and weak in health, must leave others to wear the laurels."

But such waves of self-pity came and went, as Abigail knew, and when

in need of sympathy, it was to her alone that he would appeal. He was not a man to back down or give up, not one to do anything other than what he saw to be his duty. What in another time and society might be taken as platitudes about public service were to both John and Abigail Adams a lifelong creed. And in this bleakest of hours, heading for Cambridge, and on to Philadelphia, Adams saw his way clearer and with greater resolve than ever in his life. It was a road he had been traveling for a long time.

## II

AT THE CENTER OF BRAINTREE, Massachusetts, and central to the town's way of life, was the meetinghouse, the First Church, with its bell tower and graveyard on the opposite side of the road. From the door of the house where John Adams had said goodbye to wife and children that morning, to the church, was less than a mile. Riding north out of town, he passed the snow-covered graveyard on the left, the church on the right.

He had been born in the house immediately adjacent to his own, a nearly duplicate farmer's cottage belonging to his father. He had been baptized in the church where his father was a deacon, and he had every expectation that when his time came he would go to his final rest in the same ground where his father and mother lay, indeed where leaning headstones marked the graves of the Adams line going back four generations. When he referred to himself as John Adams of Braintree, it was not in a manner of speaking.

The first of the line, Henry Adams of Barton St. David in Somersetshire, England, with his wife Edith Squire and nine children—eight sons and a daughter—had arrived in Braintree in the year 1638, in the reign of King Charles I, nearly a century before John Adams was born. They were part of the great Puritan migration, Dissenters from the Church of England who, in the decade following the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630, crossed the North Atlantic intent on making a new City of God, some twenty thousand people, most of whom came as families. Only one, the seventh of Henry Adams's eight sons remained in Braintree. He was Joseph, and he was succeeded by a second Joseph—one of Henry's eighty-nine grandchildren!—who married Hannah Bass,

a granddaughter of John and Priscilla Alden, and they had eight children, of whom one was another John, born in 1691.

They were people who earned their daily bread by the work of their hands. The men were all farmers who, through the long winters, in New England fashion, worked at other trades for "hard money," which was always scarce. The first Henry Adams and several of his descendants were maltsters, makers of malt from barley for use in baking or brewing beer, a trade carried over from England. The first John Adams, remembered as Deacon John, was a farmer and shoemaker, a man of "sturdy, unostentatious demeanor," who, like his father, "played the part of a solid citizen," as tithing man, constable, lieutenant in the militia, selectman, and ultimately church deacon, taking his place on the deacon's bench before the pulpit.

In 1734, in October, the golden time of year on the Massachusetts shore, Deacon John Adams, at age forty-three, married Susanna Boylston of Brookline. She was twenty-five, and from a family considered of higher social standing than that of her husband. Nothing written in her own hand would survive—no letters, diaries, or legal papers with her signature—nor any correspondence addressed to her by any of her family, and so, since it is also known that letters were frequently read aloud to her, there is reason to believe that Susanna Boylston Adams was illiterate.

One year later, on October 19, 1735, by the Old Style calendar, their first child, a son, was born and given his father's name. When England adopted the Gregorian calendar in 1752, October 19 became October 30.

"What has preserved this race of Adamses in all their ramifications in such numbers, health, peace, comfort, and mediocrity?" this firstborn son of Deacon John would one day write to Benjamin Rush. "I believe it is religion, without which they would have been rakes, fops, sots, gamblers, starved with hunger, or frozen with cold, scalped by Indians, etc., etc., etc., been melted away and disappeared. . . ." In truth, he was extremely proud of his descent from "a line of virtuous, independent New England farmers." That virtue and independence were among the highest of mortal attainments, John Adams never doubted. The New England farmer was his own man who owned his own land, a freeholder, and thus the equal of anyone.

The Braintree of Adams's boyhood was a quiet village of scattered houses and small neighboring farmsteads strung along the old coast road, the winding main thoroughfare from Boston to Plymouth, just back from the very irregular south shore of Massachusetts Bay. The setting was particularly picturesque, with orchards, stone walls, meadows of salt hay, and broad marshlands through which meandered numerous brooks and the Neponset River. From the shoreline the land sloped gently upward to granite outcroppings and hills, including Penn's Hill, the highest promontory, close by the Adams farm. Offshore the bay was dotted with small islands, some wooded, some used for grazing sheep. Recalling his childhood in later life, Adams wrote of the unparalleled bliss of roaming the open fields and woodlands of the town, of exploring the creeks, hiking the beaches, "of making and sailing boats . . . swimming, skating, flying kites and shooting marbles, bat and ball, football . . . wrestling and sometimes boxing," shooting at crows and ducks, and "running about to quiltings and frolics and dances among the boys and girls." The first fifteen years of his life, he said, "went off like a fairytale."

The community numbered perhaps 2,000 people. There was one other meetinghouse—a much smaller, more recent Anglican church—a schoolhouse, gristmill, village store, blacksmith shop, granite quarry, a half dozen or more taverns and, in a section called Germantown, Colonel Quincy's glass factory. With no newspaper in town, news from Boston and the world beyond came from travelers on the coast road, no communication moving faster than a horse and rider. But within the community itself, news of nearly any kind, good or bad, traveled rapidly. People saw each other at church, town meeting, in the mill, or at the taverns. Independent as a Braintree farmer and his family may have been, they were not isolated.

The Adams homestead, the farmhouse at the foot of Penn's Hill where young John was born and raised, was a five-room New England saltbox, the simplest, most commonplace kind of dwelling. It had been built in 1681, and built strongly around a massive brick chimney. Its timbers were of hand-hewn oak, its inner walls of brick, these finished on the inside with lath and plaster and faced on the exterior with pine clapboard. There were three rooms and two great fireplaces at ground level, and two rooms above. A narrow stairway tucked against the chimney,

immediately inside the front door, led to the second floor. The windows had twenty-four panes ("12-over-12") and wooden shutters. There were outbuildings and a good-sized barn to the rear, fields and orchard, and through a broad meadow flowed "beautiful, winding" Fresh Brook, as Adams affectionately described it. The well, for household use, was just out the front door. And though situated "as near as might be" to the road, the house was "fenced" by a stone wall, as was the somewhat older companion house that stood forty paces apart on the property, the house John and Abigail moved into after they were married and from which he departed on the winter morning in 1776. The one major difference between the two buildings was that the house of Adams's boyhood sat at an angle to the road, while the other faced it squarely. Across the road, in the direction of the sea, lay open fields.

In the dry spells of summer, dust from the road blew in the open windows of both houses with every passing horse or wagon. From June to September, the heat in the upstairs bedrooms could be murderous. In winter, even with logs blazing in huge kitchen fireplaces, women wore heavy shawls and men sat in overcoats, while upstairs any water left in the unheated rooms turned to ice.

In most of the essentials of daily life, as in their way of life, Adams's father and mother lived no differently than had their fathers and mothers, or those who preceded them. The furnishings Adams grew up with were of the plainest kind—a half dozen ordinary wooden chairs, a table, several beds, a looking glass or two. There was a Bible, possibly a few other books on religious subjects. Three silver spoons—one large, two small—counted prominently as family valuables. Clothes and other personal possessions were modest and time-worn. As one of the Adams line would write, "A hat would descend from father to son, and for fifty years make its regular appearance at meeting."

Small as the house was, its occupancy was seldom limited to the immediate family. Besides father and mother, three sons, and a hired girl, there was nearly always an Adams or Boylston cousin, aunt, uncle, grandparent, or friend staying the night. Men from town would stop in after dark to talk town business or church matters with Deacon John.

With the short growing season, the severe winters and stony fields, the immemorial uncertainties of farming, life was not easy and survival never taken for granted. One learned early in New England about the

battle of life. Father and mother were hardworking and frugal of necessity, as well as by principle. "Let frugality and industry be our virtues," John Adams advised Abigail concerning the raising of their own children. "Fire them with ambition to be useful," he wrote, echoing what had been learned at home.

About his mother, Adams would have comparatively little to say, beyond that he loved her deeply—she was his "honored and beloved mother"—and that she was a highly principled woman of strong will, strong temper, and exceptional energy, all traits he shared though this he did not say. Of his father, however, he could hardly say enough. There were scarcely words to express the depth of his gratitude for the kindnesses his father had shown him, the admiration he felt for his father's integrity. His father was "the honestest man" John Adams ever knew. "In wisdom, piety, benevolence and charity in proportion to his education and sphere of life, I have never known his superior," Adams would write long afterward, by which time he had come to know the most prominent men of the age on two sides of the Atlantic. His father was his idol. It was his father's honesty, his father's independent spirit and love of country, Adams said, that were his lifelong inspiration.

A good-looking, active boy, if small for his age, he was unusually sensitive to criticism but also quickly responsive to praise, as well as being extremely bright, which his father saw early, and decided he must go to Harvard to become a minister. An elder brother of Deacon John, Joseph Adams, who graduated from Harvard in 1710, had become a minister with a church in New Hampshire. Further, Deacon John himself, for as little education as he had had, wrote in a clear hand and had, as he said, "an admiration of learning."

Taught to read at home, the boy went first and happily to a dame school—lessons for a handful of children in the kitchen of a neighbor, with heavy reliance on *The New England Primer*. ("He who ne'er learns his ABC, forever will a blockhead be.") But later at the tiny local schoolhouse, subjected to a lackluster "churl" of a teacher who paid him no attention, he lost all interest. He cared not for books or study, and saw no sense in talk of college. He wished only to be a farmer, he informed his father.

That being so, said Deacon John not unkindly, the boy could come along to the creek with him and help cut thatch. Accordingly, as Adams

would tell the story, father and son set off the next morning and "with great humor" his father kept him working through the day.

At night at home, he said, "Well, John, are you satisfied with being a farmer?" Though the labor had been very hard and very muddy, I answered, "I like it very well, sir."

"Aya, but I don't like it so well: so you will go back to school today." I went but was not so happy as among the creek thatch.

Later, when he told his father it was his teacher he disliked, not the books, and that he wished to go to another school, his father immediately took his side and wasted no time with further talk. John was enrolled the next day in a private school down the road where, kindly treated by a schoolmaster named Joseph Marsh, he made a dramatic turn and began studying in earnest.

A small textbook edition of Cicero's *Orations* became one of his earliest, proudest possessions, as he affirmed with the note "John Adams Book 1749/50" written a half dozen times on the title page.

In little more than a year, at age fifteen, he was pronounced "fitted for college," which meant Harvard, it being the only choice. Marsh, himself a Harvard graduate, agreed to accompany John to Cambridge to appear for the usual examination before the president and masters of the college. But on the appointed morning Marsh pleaded ill and told John he must go alone. The boy was thunderstruck, terrified; but picturing his father's grief and the disappointment of both father and teacher, he "collected resolution enough to proceed," and on his father's horse rode off down the road alone, suffering "a very melancholy journey."

Writing years later, he remembered the day as grey and somber. Threatening clouds hung over Cambridge, and for a fifteen-year-old farm boy to stand before the grand monarchs of learning in their wigs and robes, with so much riding on the outcome, was itself as severe a test as could be imagined. His tutor, however, had assured him he was ready, which turned out to be so. He was admitted to Harvard and granted a partial scholarship.

"I was as light when I came home, as I had been heavy when I went," Adams wrote.

It had long been an article of faith among the Adamses that land was

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