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The use of John Adams as a historical character 1789--1874

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THE USE OF JOHN ADAMS AS A
HISTORICAL CHARACTER 1789-1874

BY

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B.A., Adams State College, 2004

THESIS

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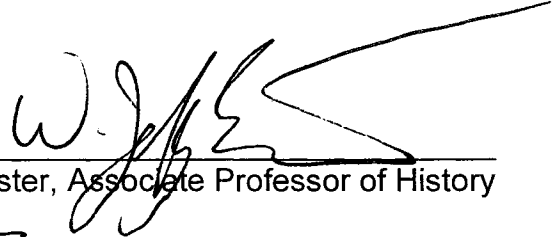
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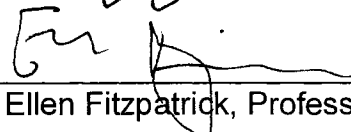
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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my family. My Dad, Dale; my Mom, Barb; my step-Dad, Doug; and my brother, Ben. Thank you for your love, support, and putting up with me. I also thank my friends, for they too had to hear me again and again talk and complain about this thesis. My professors also deserve thanks for helping me and encouraging me to be a better historian. Lastly, I would like to thank John Adams himself for capturing and holding my imagination.

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ABSTRACT

THE USE OF JOHN ADAMS AS A
HISTORICAL CHARACTER, 1789-1874

by

Heather Baures

University of New Hampshire September, 2007

John Adams was central to the founding of the United States and has held enduring interest among many generations including his own. The foundation of Adams as a historical character was constructed both by people he interacted with personally and by the turmoil of politics, casting him in roles with conflicting results. After his death, Adams was placed in a variety of roles as a historical character as people struggled to make sense of the contentious decades leading up and including the Civil War. After the Civil War, a more sophisticated "warts and all" portrayal of John Adams as a historical character as American historical identity was reexamined. The ways Adams was constructed and used as a historical character illuminates issues surrounding cultural history, historiography and conceptualization of the American Revolution by historians. That use also highlights recent interest in John Adams.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines how John Adams was assessed by the first century or so of writers and historians to take the measure of the man and his presidency. In his study of Thomas Jefferson, Merrill D. Peterson justified “running... the posthumous course” with Jefferson “because of his compelling relationship to the American experiment.”¹ I justify doing the same with Adams in part because of his centrality to the founding of the nation and the enduring interest he has motivated among many generations starting with his own in the 18th century. By examining how late 18th and 19th century historians understood Adams and his legacy, it is possible to more clearly understand the modern interest in Adams.

Since publication of more-complete copies of Adams’ diary and autobiography in the 1960’s, interest in Adams has proliferated. Historians immediately published books exploring Adams’ personality, his political views, and his life as a whole in greater depth and detail than ever before.² During the 1970’s with the bicentennial, publications including *The Adams Chronicles* and *The Character of John Adams* emerged. Publication of Adams’ *Papers* began.³ More recent scholarship on Adams involves some of the biggest names in the

¹ Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind*. Appears in Preface by author. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. vii.

² See Paige Smith, *John Adams*. 2 Vols. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1962); Edward Handler, *America and Europe in the Political Thought of John Adams*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964); John R. Howe, *The Changing Political Thought of John Adams*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966).

³ Jack Shepherd, *The Adams Chronicles: Four Generations of Greatness*. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1975); Peter Shaw, *The Character of John Adams* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1976); John Adams, *The Papers of John Adams*. Robert J. Taylor, ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977-).

academic history field. John Ferling published *John Adams: A Life* in 1992, Joseph Ellis published *Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams* in 1993.⁴ In the last six years there was the most successful biography of Adams, David McCullough's *John Adams* in 2001 and the more recent James Grant's *Party of One* in 2005.⁵

This thesis contributes to cultural history as it addresses the ongoing debates over “collective memory” and the process of turning memory into history.⁶ It also ties into the continuing debates on the historiography of the American Revolution and the conceptualization of it and its participants in American culture.⁷ As Michael Kammen wrote, it is difficult to pin exactly “when [Adams’] niche [was] permanently filled and [his] contributions beyond cavil.”⁸ Although the thesis focuses on John Adams’ treatment by one group of historical authors writing in the years 1789-1874, it reveals in part how earlier generations of Americans sought to imagine the American Revolution and its participants to meet the needs of the new nation.

⁴ John Ferling, *John Adams: A Life*. (Knoxville: University of Kentucky Press, 1992); Joseph Ellis, *Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams* (New York: Norton, 1993).

⁵ David McCullough, *John Adams*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 2001); James Grant, *Party of One*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).

⁶ See Michael Kammen, *In the Past Lane: Historical Perspectives on American Culture*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); *Ibid*, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture*. (New York: Knopf, 1991); John Higham, *History: Professional Scholarship in America*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983).

⁷ To name a few, Michael Kammen, *A Season of Youth: The American Revolution and the Historical Imagination*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978); Joyce Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans*. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2000); *Ibid*, *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

⁸ Kammen, *A Season of Youth*., p. 42.

The roots of this project lie in an abiding interest in John Adams. For years now he has consumed and, I will admit, clouded my interest in history and the American Revolution. The method of this thesis is to examine the different roles Adams fulfilled as a historical character and the needs that shaped those roles from the adoption of the U.S. Constitution in 1789 to 1874, when Charles Francis Adams re-published his monograph biography of Adams.

CHAPTER I

A DIVIDED FOUNDATION: ADAMS, FRIENDS AND POLITICS

Your Character in History may be easily foreseen. Your Administration, will be quoted by Philosophers, as a model, of profound Wisdom; by Politicians, as weak, superficial and short sighted. Mine... will have no Character at all.¹

When John Adams returned to the United States in 1788 after serving as a foreign minister for ten years, he was returning to a country newly united under the Constitution, the final step in creating a nation independent of England. By the time the Constitution was put in place, enough time had passed since the Peace of 1783, ending the American Revolution, for contemporary historians to assess the immediate impact of the Revolution and its participants. Adams as a historical character was first constructed both by people he interacted with personally and by the turmoil of politics with conflicting results.

Friends

In the first histories of the Revolution Adams was portrayed as an asset to his country. The first to be published was William Gordon's *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Establishment of the Independence of the United States of America: Including an Account of the Late War; and of the Thirteen Colonies, from Their Origin to that Period* in 1789.² Quickly on its heels came David

¹ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, [3] July 1813 in John Adams et. al., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), p. 349.

² William Gordon had some trouble getting his book published in the U.S. and so he temporarily moved to London to get it published there. William Gordon, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Establishment, of the Independence of the United States of America*. Preface. Vol. 1. (New

Ramsey's *The History of the American Revolution*, also published in 1789.³ Each mention of Adams portrayed him as talented and intelligent. From defending the soldiers involved in the "Boston Massacre" to defending the United States' rights in France for the Peace Treaty of 1783, Adams executed the task at hand with skill. Descriptions such as "warm to the cause of liberty" and "friends to independency" pepper Gordon's publication.⁴ Gordon's description of Adams' role in the "Boston Massacre" trials established him as an able lawyer, orator and someone who would do what he thought was right even if it was not popular.⁵ Ramsey also depicted Adams as an able orator in his description of Adams' defense of independence while in congress.⁶ They both emphasized Adams' role as a diplomat, which they believed he filled well, especially in France, Holland and England.⁷ Ramsey also cast Adams as a writer among "the most distinguished writers in favor of the rights of America" who "laboured in enlightening their countrymen, on the subject of their political interests, and in animating them to a proper line of conduct, in defence [sic] of their liberties."⁸

York: Hodge, Allen and Cambell, 1789), n.p. Also John Adams, *Papers of John Adams*. R. J. Taylor et. al. eds. Vol. 5. Footnote by editor. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 134.

³ David Ramsay, *The History of the American Revolution*. (Philadelphia: Aitken, 1789).

⁴ Gordon, Vol. 1. pp. 205. Vol. 2. p. 121.

⁵ Ibid, Vol. 1. pp. 205-209.

⁶ Ramsey, pp. 340-341.

⁷ Ibid., Vol. 2. pp. 121-122, 310, Vol. 3. pp. 27-28, 179, 287-288, 345, 349-350, 362, 366, 382-383. Ramsey, Vol. 1. pp. 303-304, Vol. 2. pp. 299-300, 306-307, 335.

⁸ There is no indication Ramsey had any particular publication of Adams' in mind. Ramsey, Vol. 2. p. 320.

The emphasis on Adams as an ardent patriot and multi-talented was partially a product of the state of things in 1789. There was an effort among historians to bind the nation together through their common past in the Revolution. The Revolution was the ultimate reference point, as it marked “the beginning of separate statehood, of a heightened feeling of national self-consciousness, of a newer integration of culture.”⁹ Unity meant in part portraying the founding generation as heroes with patriotic rhetoric and casting them as national icons.

History was also viewed, as William Gordon wrote, as “The school of virtue...” and historical figures were to be held “as models which ought to be followed, or as examples to be censured and avoided.”¹⁰ Both Gordon and Ramsey emphasized their efforts to portray the truth and trusted there were no intentional biases in their publications.¹¹

Gordon and Ramsey, as historians writing when many of the people they were writing about were still alive, walked a fine line. Missteps had the potential of bringing down censorship. The fact that both men corresponded directly with Adams must have influenced how they portrayed Adams because both authors asked for Adams’ opinion and for original documents to aid their research. There

⁹ Bert James Lowenberg, *American History in American Thought*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), p. 184; see also David D. Van Tassel, *Recording America’s Past: An Interpretation of the Development of Historical Studies in America 1607-1884*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 31-46, 66-76.

¹⁰ Gordon, Preface., n.p.

¹¹ *Ibid.*; Ramsey, Preface., p. iv.

is evidence that Gordon did have access to and made use of Adams' papers.¹² The letters they exchanged, especially the later ones in 1780, have almost a sycophantic feel to them on Gordon's part.¹³ Ramsey's letters to Adams reveal he respected Adams as a writer and sought his opinion.¹⁴ Ramsey even wanted to know what Adams thought of Gordon's *History* and if there were any "omissions errors or mistreatments in his [Gordon's] history" to point them out so "I will be enabled to avoid them."¹⁵

Politics

Controversy over Adams as a historical character coincided with problems he was facing as a current political figure. Adams' prime opposition, the Democratic-Republicans and particularly Thomas Jefferson, quickly realized that to control the nation and its future, they had to control its past.¹⁶ The political battle between Republicans and Federalists, especially in the election of 1800, was a contest not only for political power but also the right for either side's interpretation of the Constitution to triumph.¹⁷

¹² See John Adams et. al., *Papers of John Adams*. Vol. 3. Footnote by editor. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 313, 332-333, 403.

¹³ See William Gordon to John Adams, 8 March 1780 in John Adams et. al., *Papers of John Adams*. Vol. 9. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 25-26.; *Ibid.*, JA to William Gordon 26 May 1780, pp. 342-344.; *Ibid.*, William Gordon to JA 19 October 1780. Vol. 10. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 283.; *Ibid.*, William Gordon to JA 19 October 1780, pp. 284-285.

¹⁴ Robert L. Brunhouse, "David Ramsay, 1749-1815, Selections from His Writings," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*. Vol. 55, Part 4, (1965), pp. 94-95, 103, 111, 114-115.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 114-115.

¹⁶ Van Tassel, p. 76.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

In an effort to support his candidacy as president in the election of 1796, Adams was characterized as a prominent historical character and a leader in the Revolution. A number of writers, such as John Garner, identified Adams as the one who had “prepare[d] the minds of the people for the contest which has terminated so gloriously,” and whose public career had been “a long, persevering, and successful display of patriotic talents.” Because of Adams’ historical legacy as an able defender of rights, and a talented legal mind, congressman and diplomat, Adams deserved the presidency.¹⁸

Adams’ suitability for the office of president was questioned primarily because of the publication and misunderstanding of his *A Defence of the Constitutions of the United States*. It was a three-volume work partially written in response to criticisms concerning the American state constitutions expressed in a letter from Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, the Abbé De Mably, to Dr. Richard Price.¹⁹ Adams was also provoked to write by discussions he had with Dutch

¹⁸ [John Gardner], *A Brief Consideration of the Important Services, and Distinguished Virtues and Talents, Which Recommend Mr. Adams for the Presidency of the United States*. (Boston: Manning & Loring, 1796), pp. 7-11. Authorship attributed by Evans. Available from Readex database (Early American Imprints, Series I: Evans, 1639-1800, Record No. 30472.) See also William Smith, *The Pretensions of Thomas Jefferson to the Presidency Examined; and the Charges Against John Adams Refuted. Addressed to the Citizens of America in General; and Particularly to the Electors of the President*. (Philadelphia: John Fenno, 1796). Authorship and publisher attributed by Evans. Available from Readex database (Early American Imprints, Series I: Evans, 1639-1800, Record No. 31212). Also *Ibid.*, *Part the Second*. (November 1796). (Record No. 31213.); Tench Coxe, *The Federalist: Containing Some Strictures Upon a Pamphlet, Entitled, “The Pretensions of Thomas Jefferson to the Presidency, Examined, and the Charges Against John Adams, Refuted.” Which Pamphlet Was First Published in the Gazette of the United States, in a Series of Essays, Under the Signature of “Phocion.” Part the second*. (Philadelphia: Matthew Carey, 1796). Authorship attributed by Evans. Available from Readex database (Early American Imprints, Series I: Evans, 1639-1800, Record No. 30294.)

¹⁹ See John Adams, *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*. 3 Vols. (London: Minted for C. Dilly, in the Poultry, 1787-1788). Reprinted in New York, Philadelphia and Boston, 1787-1788. Available from Readex database (Early American Imprints, Series I: Evans, 1639-1800, Record No. 20177, 20176, 20910.) Also went through at least three

friends and the troubling news of Massachusetts possibly doing away with the governor and senate because of Turgot's letter and the "seditious meetings which would lead to Shay's Rebellion."²⁰

Based upon *A Defence*, a number of writers saw Adams as a monarchist who had turned his back on the ideal of the Revolution.²¹ John Gardner pointed out that although *A Defence* was "a work containing, perhaps, more just ideas on the subject of government, than any that has yet been offered to the world" it was used by the Republicans to discredit Adams. From "the moment it appeared, it was attacked by the whole Jeffersonian party, without reserve, without decency, without the smallest regard to truth." Gardner cited jealousy as their provocation for the attacks, for they knew well "that Mr. Adams' prevailing virtues and talents left their idol much in the shade, and therefore determined if possible to destroy his popularity."²²

A Defence of the Constitutions of the United States caused further problems for Adams after John Taylor published *An Inquiry into the Principles*

editions within a decade. Available from Readex database (Early American Imprints, Series I: Evans, 1639-1800, Record No. 31689, 31690, 31691.)

²⁰ Adams, *Diary and Autobiography*. L. H. Butterfield, ed. Vol. 4. (Cambridge: University of Harvard Press, 1961), p. 202. Appears in footnote by editor.

²¹ One example is "Americanius," *Boston, 24th Sept. 1796. At this important crisis, George Washington having declined to serve as president of the United States, after the 4th of March next, and John Adams having been held up as a candidate to succeed him in that office...* (Boston: n.p., 1796). Available from Readex database (Early American Imprints, Series I: Evans, 1639-1800, Record No. 29982.)

²² [John Gardner], *A Brief Consideration of the Important Services, and Distinguished Virtues and Talents, Which Recommend Mr. Adams for the Presidency of the United States*. pp. 12-13.

and Policy of the United States in 1814.²³ Although *An Inquiry* was considered dated upon publication and was a product of the political environment it was originally conceived in about fifteen years previous, it revived the accusations that Adams was a monarchist who had turned on the principles of the Revolution. Adams himself felt compelled to respond to Taylor via private correspondence.²⁴ According to Roy Frank Nichols, “the arguments of Adams... long disturbed Taylor...” Most alarming to Taylor was Adams’ apparent support of an aristocracy, according to Nichols.²⁵ Taylor thought that Adams had paid too much attention to “political skeletons, constructed with fragments torn from monarchy, aristocracy and democracy... and too little to the ethereal moral principles, alone able to bind governments to the interest of nations.”²⁶

Despite the accusations and politicking, Adams was elected president by a slim margin of three electoral votes and took office in 1797. He would serve one term. During his presidency Adams faced many opponents and the 1800 election was an opportunity for Adams’ critics to come out en masse.

²³ John Taylor, *Inquiry into the Principles and Policy of the Government of the United States*. Introduction by Roy Frank Nichols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Limited, 1950). Available from The Online Library of Liberty <<http://oll.libertyfund.org/ToC/0549.php>>.

²⁴ See Adams, *The Works of John Adams*. Charles Francis Adams, ed. Vol. 6. (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1851).

²⁵ Taylor, *Inquiry...* Introduction by Roy Frank Nichols. pp. 24-25. For more on Taylor’s political theories and ideas, see C. William Hill, Jr., *The Political Theory of John Taylor of Caroline*. (Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Press, Inc., 1977); Eugene Tenbroeck Mudge, *The Social Philosophy of John Taylor of Caroline*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939); and Robert E. Shalhope, *John Taylor of Caroline: Pastoral Republican*. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1980).

²⁶ Taylor, *Inquiry...* p. 31.

Published in 1800, *The Prospect Before Us* leveled both old and new accusations against Adams.²⁷ Pointing to his most recent historical legacy, its author portrayed Adams as monarchical and an “inflexible friend of England.”²⁸ As president, Adams “... has never opened his lips, or lifted his pen, without threatening and scolding. The grand object of his administration has been to exasperate the rage of contending parties, to calumniate and destroy every man who differs from his opinions.”²⁹ The publication drew out the implications of precedent of the Alien and Seditions Acts, and although Adams was not the genesis of the Acts, he was personally depicted as a threat to freedom and the rights of citizens.³⁰ Adams was also viewed as a traitor to Alexander Hamilton, a fellow Federalist.³¹

Alexander Hamilton had opposed Adams during his presidency and covertly undermined him in the 1800 election. Hamilton penned a letter in 1800 criticizing Adams and his presidency, casting Adams as a vain, vindictive person and a traitor to the Federalists.³² Hamilton admitted Adams did deserve praise for

²⁷ *The Prospect Before Us*. 3 Vols. (Richmond Virginia: n.p., 1800). Authorship has commonly been attributed to James Thompson Callander. Available from Readex database (Early American Imprints, Series I: Evans, 1639-1800, Record Nos. 37083, 37084.)

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. 1. p. 28.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

³⁰ Adams did sign the acts, but they had originated in Congress. There was some censuring of Congress, but more often when the opposition mentioned the Acts they were lumped together with other Adams policies they disapproved of. *The Prospect Before Us*, Vol. 1. pp. 111-125.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

³² Alexander Hamilton, *Letter From Alexander Hamilton, Concerning the Public Conduct and Character of John Adams, Esq; President of the United States*. (New-York: Printed for John Lang, by Furman & Loudon, 1800). Went through at least four editions, all in 1800. Available from Readex database (Early American Imprints, Series I: Evans, 1639-1800, Record No. 37566.)

his past services, such as his work as a peace commissioner, and past successes, but was concerned about “the disgusting egotism, the distempered jealousy, and the ungovernable indiscretion of Mr. Adams’s temper, joined to some doubts of the correctness of his maxims of Administration.”³³ Although Adams was praised for his conduct concerning the XYZ affair, he offended members of his own party, particularly Hamilton, by his actions in keeping the United States out of a war with France.³⁴ The worst offence, according to Hamilton, was when Adams opposed Hamilton’s appointment as second in command of a standing army under Washington. General Washington had not opposed placing Hamilton into that rank and Hamilton wanted to know why Adams objected. Further, Hamilton was not promoted to first commanding officer after the death of Washington in 1799 as he felt he ought to have been.³⁵ By May 1800 Adams had realized some of his cabinet members were not answering to him but to Hamilton, and he dismissed two, James McHenry and Timothy Pickering. Hamilton blamed the suddenness of the dismissal on Adams’ “ungovernable temper.” Hamilton continued, “he is often liable to paroxysms [sic] of anger, which deprive him of self command, and produce very outrageous behavior to those who approach him. Most, if not all his Ministers, and several distinguished Members of the two Houses of Congress, have been humiliated by the effects of these gusts of passion.”³⁶ Portraying Adams as a rash, impulsive

³³ Ibid., pp. 10-12.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 23, 24-26.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 45-46.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 38.

and unstable person guided by unrestrained passions struck a blow at Adams' honor. More than the other personal accusations, Hamilton's words suggest there was something wrong in Adams' core character. As Joanne Freeman explored in her book, honor meant everything to the founders, and "historical dishonor was the ultimate threat."³⁷

Hamilton assured his readers that those who had not "had opportunities of closely inspecting the weaknesses of Mr. Adams's character, the details of this extraordinary interview would appear incredible," but to those who have met Adams, like Hamilton, "they would not even furnish an occasion of surprise." They were in the end, "irrefragable proofs of his unfitness for the station of Chief Magistrate."³⁸

A few supporters of Adams found what they felt were defective arguments in Hamilton's letter and published works tearing it apart sentence by sentence. Many of Hamilton's accusations against Adams could not be proven, according to Uzal Ogden, and Hamilton's own words contained the relevant qualifiers to his accusations, such as Mr. Adams was "represented" in a certain way, it "was said that..." and so on. Hamilton never solidly asserted anything, and did more injury to himself than to Adams in accusing without proof. Hamilton based his

³⁷ Joanne B. Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic*. (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2001), pg. 272-274. Freeman defines honor as "respected by the public." For example, "a man of good reputation was respected and esteemed; a man of honor had an exalted reputation..." Joanne Freeman, pg. xvi, xx. See also pg. 296 note 9 for a body of works on fame and honor in the early republic.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

accusations upon “unauthenticated... newspaper testimony.”³⁹ It was apparent to others as well that Hamilton’ letter lacked supporting evidence.⁴⁰

The true danger of Hamilton’s letter was its reprinting in 1809. When it first appeared it was not taken completely seriously. Adams had a number of defenders and there was little evidence to show that it impacted the election of 1800. But in 1809, the contents of such a letter could be taken seriously. Many of the people involved were no longer publicly active and possibly did not know of the reprinting. Some of them were dead - most notably Alexander Hamilton himself. Because the reprinting was so removed from the original events, many of the details that would have served as defense for Adams against specific attacks were no longer fresh in people’s minds. The only source of facts and information would be found in notes and other writings that happened to have been taken down and still existed in 1809. Adams’ own notes sketched out in 1801 served him well in rebutting Hamilton’s reprinted letter.⁴¹

Adams was often identified as the known variable in the political equation of 1800 and, given the current state of things, his supporters urged people to

³⁹ Uzal Ogden, *A Letter to Major General Alexander Hamilton, Containing Observations on His Letter, Concerning the Public Conduct and Character of John Adams, Esq. President of the United States. By a Citizen of these States.* (New-York: G.F. Hopkins, 1800), pp. 8-9, 17. Attributed to Ogden in Ford, P.L. *Bibliotheca Hamiltonia* (New York, 1886), s.v. 79. It was also reprinted in Salem, Massachusetts. Available from Readex database (Early American Imprints, Series I: Evans, 1639-1800, Record No. 38152.)

⁴⁰ “Cincinnatus,” *A Reply to Alexander Hamilton’s Letter, Concerning the Public Conduct and Character of John Adams, Esq. President of the United States. By a Federal Republican.* (New-York: L. Nichols, & Co., 1800). Available from Readex database (Early American Imprints, Series I: Evans, 1639-1800, Record No. 38370.) and *Vindication of the Conduct and Character of John Adams...* (New-York: Printed by John C. Totten, & Co., 1800). Available from Readex database (Early American Imprints, Series I: Evans, 1639-1800, Record No. 38941.)

⁴¹ Adams, *The Works of John Adams.* Charles Francis Adams, ed. Vol. 9., (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1854), pp. 240-241.

stick with what they knew. Adams' historical legacy qualified him for re-election, according to Uzal Ogden, because Adams had successfully led the country for four years already. "It would be *impolitic*, as well as *ungrateful* and *indelicate*, to withdraw our confidence and trust from an *approved* and *successful* pilot [italics in original]."⁴² John Black wrote that anyone familiar with Adams' administration must know the accusations to be false, and that "any *alteration* in the *presidency*... will be productive of great national calamities."⁴³ According to a third author, Adams was the person to rally behind because "to be instrumental in promoting the happiness of America, Mr. Adams has laboured for more than forty years."⁴⁴ It was clear to these writers that Adams' historical legacy told a different story than what Hamilton and others had portrayed.

John Wood's *History of the Administration of John Adams, Late President of the United States* was also highly partisan and political. Aaron Burr disapproved of the way he was portrayed in it and had it suppressed. Through some misunderstandings between Wood and his publisher, several copies were distributed, including one to James Cheetham, a New York publisher who hated Burr. He contacted Jefferson who urged the book be released. With his backing and a few changes, the book was published in 1802. In the work "Wood had

⁴² Ibid., pp. 8-9.

⁴³ John Black, *Address to the Federal Republicans of Burlington County, Recommending to Them to Support the Present Members in the Legislature from That County, at the Ensuing Election, as Friendly to the Re-election of President Adams and Governor Howell. By a Committee, Appointed at the Court-House, on the 30th August, 1800*. Introduction. (Trenton: Sherman, Mershon, & Thomas, 1800). Available from Readex database (Early American Imprints, Series I: Evans, 1639-1800, Record No. 36771.); Ibid., p. 24.

⁴⁴ "Cincinnatus," p. 15.

transformed Washington into a leading Jeffersonian and concentrated his fire on Adams.⁴⁵ Wood accused Adams of advocating for monarchy and aristocracy for the United States, usurping power while he was president, and possessing undesirable personality traits, such as vanity and an unstable temper.⁴⁶ Cheetham also supplied a narrative of the suppression, wherein Adams was again described as a monarchist.⁴⁷ Wood's *History* and Cheetham's *Narrative* would prove to be a novelty later in the nineteenth century.

As far as what appears in these writings, Adams' post-revolution politics were the point over which Adams became a polarizing figure. John Patrick Diggins suggested that Adams was unpopular as a historical character in part because he was a loser in the last national event he was directly involved with, the election of 1800.⁴⁸ Most of what would tarnish Adams' historical legacy related directly to issues surrounding his presidency.

Mixing Friends and Politics

In 1805 Mercy Otis Warren published *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution* and bridged the political literature and

⁴⁵ Van Tassel, pp. 78-79.

⁴⁶ John Wood, *History of the Administration of John Adams, Late President of the United States*. (New York: Burt Franklin, 1968).

⁴⁷ [James Cheetham], *A Narrative of the Suppression by Col. Burr, of the History of the Administration of John Adams, Late President of the United States, Written by John Wood ... To Which is Added a Biography of Thomas Jefferson, President of the United States; and of General Hamilton: With Strictures on the Conduct of John Adams, and on the Character of General C. C. Pinckney. Extracted Verbatim from the Suppressed History. By a Citizen of New-York*. (New York: Dennistion and Cheetham, 1802), pp. 6-7. Material courtesy of University Archives, University of New Hampshire Library, Durham, NH.

⁴⁸ John Patrick Diggins, *John Adams*. (New York: Times Books, 2003), pp. 157.

the Adams of Gordon and Ramsey.⁴⁹ Warren wrote in a time when history was still considered a repository of examples to be followed and mistakes to be avoided. She had two different broad ways of characterizing Adams at hand and she tried to reconcile the two, but without success. Instead, Warren's Adams was split in two chronologically. The pre-1788 Adams was unflinchingly loyal to his country and the Revolution. Warren particularly emphasized Adams the diplomat, unfailingly defending his country's rights and providing invaluable services for his country in France, Holland and England.⁵⁰ Inexplicably she neglected to mention Adams by name in connection with the 1770 Boston Massacre Trials, and only vaguely mentioned "some of the first counselors at law."⁵¹ Warren's oversight baffled even Adams himself, and as a close family friend he wrote to her how upset he was that she did not have him appear on the "theatre of politics" until 1774, insisting he was active well before then.⁵²

Warren described the post-diplomat Adams of 1788 as someone who had "relinquished the republican system, and forgotten the principles of the American revolution, which he had advocated for near twenty years."⁵³ She pointed to A

⁴⁹ Mercy Otis Warren, *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution*. Lester H. Cohen, ed. Vol. 1. (Indianapolis: Library Fund Inc., 1994). The original was in three volumes. This reprint makes note of the original volume begin and end points, as well as the original pagination. Footnotes will use the reprint pagination.

⁵⁰ See *Ibid.*, Vol. 1. pp. 73, 168-169, 176, 291, 294. Vol. 2. pp. 423-424, 555-559, 563-565.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁵² John Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, 27 July 1807 in John Adams and Mercy Otis Warren, *Correspondence Between John Adams and Mercy Otis Warren*. Charles F. Adams, ed. (New York: Arno Press, Inc., 1972), p. 354.

⁵³ Warren, Vol. 2. p. 675.

Defence of the Constitutions of the United States as proof of his conversion.⁵⁴

Embedded in this was a very powerful, influential Adams, who because he appeared moral and was knowledgeable was able to influence people.⁵⁵ Unable to fully reconcile the pre- and post-diplomat Adams, Warren left it to future historians to “investigate the causes of his lapse from former republican principles...”⁵⁶

Like Gordon and Ramsey, Warren corresponded with Adams. But she was also a family friend. Adams and his wife had been exchanging letters with Warren and her husband for years. They had depended on each other for reliable information and descriptions of events and people during the Revolution, building trust between them. The friendship proved trying for Warren when Adams wrote a number of long, angry letters to her concerning her *History* and how he appeared in it.⁵⁷ One accusation Adams leveled at Warren was that her *History* “has been written to the taste of the nineteenth century, and accommodated to gratify the passions, prejudices, and feelings of the party who are now predominate. The characters are not such as you esteemed them in the times when they acted, but as such will please the present fashion.”⁵⁸ Although Warren was well-read, there is no explicit evidence that Warren had read Gordon or Ramsey. She must have been aware, however, of what had been said about

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 676.

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 676-677.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 677.

⁵⁷ See John Adams and Mercy Otis Warren, *Correspondence Between John Adams and Mercy Otis Warren*. Charles F. Adams, ed. (New York: Arno Press, Inc., 1972).

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 463.

Adams during his presidency, but there is no explicit evidence she was unduly influenced by it. Warren was not a person to balk at stating exactly what she thought, and her status as a friend of Adams did not change that. Other historians of the early 1800's tended to stay away from the controversy surrounding Adams' politics and presidency.

Adams' relationship with Jedidiah Morse earned him a unique place in Morse's *Annals of the American Revolution: or, A Record of the Causes and Events which Produced, and Terminated in the Establishment and Independence of the American Republic*, published in 1824.⁵⁹ Morse took the liberty of reprinting a couple of letters Adams had written to him on the subject of the origins of the Revolution, and was enthusiastic in introducing them to the reader.⁶⁰ They were a rare glimpse at history according to John Adams. Adams' presidency or any of the controversies surrounding Adams are not mentioned at all. This publication was a compilation of certain primary documents and the content was guided by said documents with minimal narrative. But it was also a sign of the times

Paul Allen's *A History of the American Revolution: Comprehending all the Principal Events both in the Field and in the Cabinet*, published in 1822, made Adams look much like the Adams of Gordon and Ramsey.⁶¹ Adams was, according to Allen, a "patriot" whose sense of doing what was right outweighed

⁵⁹ Jedidiah Morse, *Annals of the American Revolution: or, A Record of the Causes and Events Which Produced, and Terminated in the Establishment and Independence of the American Republic*. (Hartford, Connecticut: n. p., 1824).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 195-2.

⁶¹ See Paul Allen, *A History of the American Revolution: Comprehending all the Principal Events both in the Field and in the Cabinet*. 2 Vols. (Boston: Gregg Press, 1972). Facsimile reprint of 1822 edition.

his need to be popular.⁶² Allen avoided the controversies by not mentioning much about Adams as a diplomat, and consequently Adams actually appears little in the publication. The emphasis Allen placed on the impact of Adams' role in the Revolution via the Boston Massacre Trials also linked his work with his predecessors, Gordon in particular.

William Gordon and Paul Allen both rendered Adams the instigator of the militarization of the Revolution. Adams' success at defining manslaughter so broadly in the Boston Massacre Trials, according to Gordon, encouraged patriot leaders to alter "their plan of opposition to the military" by "promot[ing] a particular attention to the militia and the manual exercise" so "that the country might be qualified for repelling arms by arms, whenever the same should be requisite for the preservation of their liberties."⁶³ The colonists would have to face the British legally; that is, as two armies supported by two independent nations at war. This shift from a state of rebellion to a legitimate war was a major evolution in the mode of people's thinking and something Gordon thought Adams had contributed to by setting the precedent.

Allen also saw Adams as the impetus for the meeting of army against army. The trial and Adams' handling of it "gave a character to the kind of resistance made by the Colonies, in direct contradiction of the falsehoods continually poured into the Ministerial ear - that a *factious mob* opposed the governmental decrees." Allen set up Adams as the definition of American Patriots - that they were not a mob but "patriotick and conscientious men who ranged

⁶² Ibid., Vol. 1. p. 148.

⁶³ Gordon, Vol.1. p. 211.

themselves against the usurpations of the Ministry.” They “were too noble minded to take advantage of the mad ebullitions of a *mob* [italics in original]” and “were guided by a solemn sense of duty to themselves, their country and their posterity, in struggling to maintain the sanctity of chartered rights.”⁶⁴ According to Allen, Adams gave credence to the patriot’s cause by altering the English legislators’ perception of Americans. Hot-headed, irrational and impassioned colonial mobs could be ignored or crushed, while rational, reasonable and level-headed citizens of a nation had to be shown respect and taken seriously.

Whether what Gordon and Allen gave credit to Adams for was accurate or not was not the issue. It was in part a product of historians using historical figures as moral examples. Also, as Sydney Fisher wrote, the effort to unite the country under a common past continued into the 1800’s as the United States (and the world) were uncomfortable with its newness.⁶⁵ Even respected historians such as Jared Sparks and Washington Irving edited history and primary documents to remove controversy or “damaging admissions.” Charles Thompson, who had been the secretary of the Continental Congress, burnt the manuscript to his own history of the Revolution rather than allow it to be published and resurrect old controversies.⁶⁶ Mason L. Weems also published what passed as history during this time. Weems is now infamous for completely fabricating so-called facts,

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 148-149.

⁶⁵ Sydney G. Fisher, “The Legendary and Myth-Making Process in Histories of the American Revolution,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 51, No. 204. (Apr.-Jun., 1912), pp. 53-75.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 55-57.

particularly in his publications about George Washington.⁶⁷ For example, Washington never said he could not tell a lie after being caught chopping down a cherry tree, and he did not have wooden teeth. But at the time the moral value of those stories outweighed their accuracy. While Adams did not have a hagiographer like Mason Weems, Adams fared well in the first few decades of historical writings on the American Revolution and Early Republic. Though there were no biographies of him, as there were with many others of the founding generation, Adams was looked upon favorably by historians, some of whom were his peers. The exception was his presidency, the merits and mistakes of which were debated well into the 1800's.

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 64-66.

CHAPTER II

PORTRAYING ADAMS DURING THE SECTIONAL CRISIS AND CIVIL WAR

I cannot and will not be indifferent to the condition and prospects of my country. I love the people of America and believe them to be incapable of ingratitude. They have been, they may be, and they are deceived. It is the duty of somebody to undeceive them.¹

During the 1820's and 1830's Adams did not appear in many publications outside of printed eulogies after his death. Explanations for this can be found in the relative tranquility of 1820's politics known as "The Era of Good Feelings," when much of what had divided the nation politically before had disappeared. Adams' son, John Quincy Adams, was a Republican and President. The nation had survived two wars and a number of internal crises and proved resistant enough to withstand them for fifty years - longer than many of the Founders thought the United States would survive. During this era John Adams played a muted role as a historical character. However, by the 1840's and 1850's circumstances had changed and new demands brought Adams new attention. Adams was placed in a variety of roles as a historical character as people struggled to make sense of the contentious decades leading up to and including the Civil War.

Written with the expressed purpose of commemorating Adams (and Jefferson), eulogies delivered and published in 1826-1827 are relevant to this

¹ John Adams to Benjamin Rush, 27 February 1805 in John Adams and Benjamin Rush, *The Spur of Fame*. John Schutz and Douglass Adair, eds. (San Marino, California: The Huntington Library, 1966), p. 24.

research because they influenced later historical writers. Most notable is Daniel Webster's eulogy, delivered in August 1826.² Echoes of this eulogy were seen as soon as Richard Cranch's eulogy, which was delivered in March 1827 and published that same year.³ Webster hinted at others' concerns that as the founding generation were dying off, details concerning their lives and deeds were being lost. Webster wondered what could still be learned from Charles Carroll, whom Webster identified as the sole surviving signer of the Declaration of Independence. That feeling of lost opportunity made the need for narrative history more acute and influenced Adams as a historical character.

Adams' reappearance as a historical character was also in part due to the increased demand for printed works with the rise of a literary class in the United States.⁴ Whereas previous works had focused on his public acts as congressman or president, publications in the 1840's and 1850's developed and expanded on Adams' private life as events and details concerning his early life, family and retirement were published for the first time.

The most immediate new role for Adams was as a retiree. Adams was a bit of a unique creature among the founders, living more than a quarter of his life in retirement. Characterizing a retired founder was uncharted territory. Historians

² Daniel Webster, *The Works of Daniel Webster*. Edward Everett, ed. (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1853). Available from Making of America - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/ABK0760.0001.001>>

³ William Cranch, *Memoir of the Life, Character and Writings of John Adams. Read March 16th, 1827 in the Capitol, in the City of Washington at the Request of the Columbian Institute, and Published by Their Order*. (City of Washington: S. A. Elliot, 1827).

⁴ For more on the literary class, see Gilman M. Ostrander, *Republic of Letters: The American Intellectual Community, 1776-1865*. (Madison, WI: Madison House, 1999).

looked upon Adams' retirement years with mixed feelings. A few saw Adams as a man consumed with jealousy, anger, hate and vindictiveness in his retirement. A reviewer of Richard Hildreth's *The History of the United States of America* noted Hildreth described Adams' character as marked by "irritable vehemence and ever-active egotism." When a new wave of attacks enveloped Adams after his son left the Federalist Party Adams supposedly struck back with "new malignancy."⁵ Others saw Adams the retiree as aging gracefully and focused on pastimes other than revenge. Charles March remembered an anecdote Daniel Webster had told him of Webster's last visit to Adams' home. Adams, according to Webster, "always said something which you could afterwards recollect." A friend came in while Webster was visiting and asked after Adams' health. "I am not well," he replied. "I inhabit a weak, frail, decayed tenement; battered by the winds, and broken in upon by the storms; *and from all I can learn, the landlord does not intend to repair* [italics in original]."⁶ March also noted Adams' continued paternalistic interest in the United States as he had "rocked the cradle of the nation, and protected its infancy" and in his old age "still held over it an affectionate, and paternal care."⁶

The rising literary tide included a proliferation of encyclopedic publications, which provided an ideal medium for presenting Adams' life as a whole. As never before readers could search for Adams in an encyclopedia and read previously

⁵ Unsigned review of *The History of the United States of America* by Richard Hildreth. Vol. V. *The Living Age* Vol. 31, Issue 387 (October 18, 1851): 134. Available from Making of America - Cornell University <<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=ABR0102-0031-5>>

⁶ Charles March, *Reminiscences of Congress. By Charles W. March.* (New York: Baker and Scribner, 1850), pp. 61-62. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/ABT5127.0001.001>>

difficult to obtain details about his life, such as when he was born, when he attended college and when he married.⁷

Iconography

Adams had an iconic quality, particularly because he and Thomas Jefferson died within hours of each other on the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1826. The Founding generation had passed away by 1826 with few exceptions, and when both eminent men of the Revolution died within hours of each other, many took it as a sign that God approved of the United States. However, it was also seen as a warning that the example the founders set “as models of republican virtue and civil spirit” had to be followed.⁸ Historians in the 1850’s repeatedly expressed amazement at the “striking coincidence” as Henry Watson called it.⁹ A writer in the *United States*

⁷ *Encyclopædia Americana. A Popular Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, Literature, History, Politics and Biography, a New Ed.; Including a Copious Collection of Original Articles in American Biography; on the Basis of the 7th ed. of the German Conversations-lexicon.* Francis Lieber et. al. eds. (Boston: Mussey & co., 1851), pp. 44-45. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/AJD6870.0001.001>>; Benson Lossing, *Our Countrymen, or, Brief Memoirs of Eminent Americans. Illustrated by One Hundred and Three Portraits.* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, 1855), pp. 87-89. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/AAN1714.0001.001>>; William O. Blake, *The American Encyclopedia of History, Biography and Travel, Comprising Ancient and Modern History: the Biography of Eminent Men of Europe and America, and the Lives of Distinguished Travelers.* (Columbus: J. & H. Miller, 1856), pp. 634-635. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/ACA9821.0001.001>>; Parke Godwin, *Cyclopedia of Universal Biography: A Record of the Names of the Most Eminent Men of the World.* (New York: A. S. Barnes and Co., 1856), pp. 7-8. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/ABA5611.0001.001>>

⁸ David Hackett Fischer, *Liberty and Freedom: A Visual History of America's Founding Ideas.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 189.

⁹ Henry C. Watson, *History of the United States of America, from the Discovery to the Present Time.* (Philadelphia: Thomas, Cowperthwait & Co., 1854), p. 796. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/ABJ1624.0001.001>>; John Frost, *Pictorial History of America, From the Earliest Time to the Close of the Mexican War... Comp. from the Best Authorities.* Vol. 2. (Philadelphia: J. B. Smith and Co., 1857), p. 586.

Democratic Review in 1855 proclaimed that one of them dying on that day would have “attracted public notice,” but both dying on the same day, and on the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence “stamp[ed] the day with a perpetual seal of sacredness.”¹⁰

The tandem deaths of Adams and Jefferson proved useful to historians who were making an effort to bury old feuds. In the face of increasing sectional tensions, especially over slavery, historians were motivated to create a cohesive common past in the nation’s origins in the Revolution. Part of this was emphasizing commonalities, and the lives of Adams of Massachusetts and Jefferson of Virginia lent themselves to this goal. Josiah Quincy, quoting an 1826 report made by a committee of the Common Council of Massachusetts, pointed out that both men had “commenced their political career at the same time.” They had also “sustained the same important trusts and high offices” and “contributed so essentially to the achieving of our independence.” They both lived long enough “to see their children’s children realize the blessings of that independence which, fifty years before, they jointly risked their lives to secure to them.” In the end, they both were “summoned, on the same day, and almost at the same hour, to receive the reward of their virtue and patriotism.”¹¹ Benson

Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan
<<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/ABJ1235.0002.001>>

¹⁰ “American Leaders: No. I Thomas Jefferson.” *The United States Democratic Review* Vol. 35, Issue 5 (May 1855): 385. Available from Making of America - Cornell University
<<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=AGD1642-0035-74>>

¹¹ Josiah Quincy, *A Municipal History of the Town and City of Boston, During Two Centuries. From September 17, 1630, to September 17, 1830.* (Boston: C. C. Little and J. Brown, 1852), p.

Lossing also noted “they were both on the committee that framed the Declaration of Independence; both voted for that instrument just fifty years before; both signed it; both had been foreign ministers; and both had been President of the Republic they had helped to establish.”¹² It was also observed by a writer in the *United States Democratic Review* that they were about the same age when they experienced their first taste of the radicalism of the coming revolution - Adams heard a speech by James Otis on *Writs of Assistance* and Jefferson heard Patrick Henry argue against the Stamp Act.¹³ Although this was a theme first mentioned by Daniel Webster in 1826, their repetition in the 1850’s is significant because by emphasizing what the two men had in common, these writers united Adams and Jefferson and overlooked the old political disputes in favor of a cohesive past.

Another dimension to this emphasizing a common past was glossing over past disputes. Adams’ reputed dying words, “independence forever” (another product of Webster), evoked pictures of a united congress approving of the Declaration without naysayers. As the *Encyclopædia Americana* pointed out, Adams’ final words were of “the same hallowed sentiment on his lips, which on that glorious day, fifty years before, he had uttered on the floor of congress.”¹⁴ The interest in Adams’ last words was spread across the better part of a decade

208. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan
<<http://name.umd.umich.edu/AJA2096.0001.001>>

¹² Lossing, *Our Countrymen...* pp. 87-89.

¹³ “American Leaders: No. I Thomas Jefferson.”: 374-375.

¹⁴ Quote is from *Encyclopædia Americana*. p. 52.

and in both monographs and journals.¹⁵ The repetitiveness of these accounts in a variety of publications demonstrated how much the interest in Adams' last words was a function of creating a cohesive past.

The effort to create a peaceful and cooperative past was partly provoked by increased political tensions over the prospects of slavery and states' rights. Portraying the founders as a single-minded group of men allowed a more stable use of history. The revised past could provide moral guideposts in the increasingly confusing and seemingly corrupt environment Americans found themselves in the 1840's and 1850's.

Directly contradicting this was a sectional power struggle over national history.¹⁶ As sectional tensions increased, southerners realized that most national history was being written and published in the north.¹⁷ Given this, it was not surprising that Adams was primarily mentioned in northern publications. There were only a few from what is now known as the Midwest.¹⁸ When Adams was mentioned in southern publications, it was usually unfavorably.¹⁹ The most

¹⁵ See "The Last Words of the Learned," *The United States Democratic Review* Vol. 20, Issue 106 (April 1847): 347. Available from Making of America - Cornell University <<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=AGD1642-0020-130>>; Watson, *History of the United States of America, from the Discovery to the Present Time*. p. 796.; Lossing, *Our Countrymen...* pp. 87-89.; Blake, *The American Encyclopedia of History, Biography and Travel...* pp. 643-644.

¹⁶ See David D. Van Tassel, *Recording America's Past: An Interpretation of the Development of Historical Studies 1607-1884*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 134-141.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

¹⁸ Adams was mentioned in William O. Blake, *The American Encyclopedia of History, Biography and Travel...* and Daniel Munger, *Political Landmarks*. (Detroit: Fox & Eastman, 1851). Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/AEW6833.0001.001>>

glaring example of this was in James Pinkney Hambleton's *A Biographical Sketch of Henry A. Wise...*, published in Richmond, Virginia. Hambleton included a long paragraph recapping all the problems Adams had caused, and dismissing the Know-Nothings as a political party because he perceived their roots to be in Adams' policies.²⁰ For the most part, however, Adams as a historical character was decidedly controlled by Northerners.

Writer

Much of Adams' strength as a historical character came from the strength of his prolific writing. Benson Lossing identified Adams' *Essay on the Canon and Feudal Law*, published in 1764, as launching his career.²¹ Lucius Sargent criticized those who had damaged Adams' reputation and thus stopped the flow of Adams' writings. "Surpassingly delightful were the outpourings, till some thoughtless wight [sic], by an ill-timed allusion, opened the fountain of bitter waters - then, history, literature, the arts, all were buried... giving place to

¹⁹ Adams was mentioned a couple of times in *Debow's Review, Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial Progress and Resources* and *Southern Quarterly Review*, both published in New Orleans and *The Southern Literary Messenger; Devoted to Every Department of Literature and the Fine Arts*, published in Richmond, VA.

²⁰ James Pinkney Hambleton, *A Biographical Sketch of Henry A. Wise: With A History of the Political Campaign in Virginia in 1855, to Which is Added a Review of the Position of Parties in the Union, and a Statement of the Political Issues: Distinguishing Them on the eve of the Presidential Campaign of 1856*. (Richmond, VA: J. W. Randolph, 1856), pp. 65-66. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/AFJ9125.0001.001>> Cites Amer. State Trials, p. 658 as the source for the so-called seditious text.

²¹ Lossing, *Our Countrymen...*, p. 87.

Jefferson's injustice, the Mazzei letters, and Callender's prospect before us...²²

In Sargent's opinion the nation had been the loser.

Adams was rediscovered as a writer when *The Works of John Adams* were published from 1850 to 1856. One reviewer, after only seeing part of the ten volume project, declared Adams a "vigorous and powerful writer." He belonged at "the head of all his illustrious compeers; and his writings are scarcely more distinguished for energy and originality of thought, than as specimens of the purest English." The praise continued, "he never touches a subject on which he does not seem entirely at home; and however familiar with it you may have supposed yourself, he is sure to open up some new field of thought which you had never explored." In the end, "it is not too much to say, that no American library should be reckoned complete, until this noble national work makes a part of it. It is printed in a style every way worthy of the name and mission of its author."²³ *The Works* contained a variety of letters, essays and books written by Adams spanning most of his life. They also contained a few letters he had received, as well as his diary and autobiography. For a generation who had not met Adams personally, the publication of *The Works* brought them close to Adams by showcasing his vast collection of writings. *The Works* opened up the

²² [Lucius Manlius Sargent], *Dealings With the Dead. By a Sexton of the Old School*. (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1856), p. 162. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/ABK3216.0001.001>>

²³ Unsigned review of *The Works of John Adams*, by John Adams. *Little, Brown & Co.'s Advertiser* (February 1854): 10. Appended to David Hume, *The philosophical works of David Hume. Including all the essays, and exhibiting the more important alterations and corrections in the successive editions pub. by the author*. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/AJE6344.0001.001>>

possibility of placing Adams into many different roles, and the ones that were emphasized are indicative of the needs of people and historians in the 1850's.

Publication of *The Works* illuminated Adams as an eyewitness and participant in the founding of the United States. One reviewer claimed, "no thorough knowledge of our constitutional history can be acquired without a careful perusal of them."²⁴ Another argued it was "needless to say that the publication will be one of unsurpassed value and interest, not to Americans only, but to all enlightened nations, for it will necessarily involve many important particulars respecting the internal features of our republican institutions." The reviewer continued, "we want to know all the sentiments of a man living among and participating in the events..." and ultimately, the public would "learn from this diary that there are other heroes and patriots, and other heroic deeds, than fearless warriors and the life-parilling [sic] courage of the battlefield."²⁵ On the other hand, another reviewer denied the relevance of Adams' "political speculations" as they were "called forth by the demands of a particular crisis, written on the spur of the moment, without pretension to extensive research or to literary flourish, and, consequently, about in crude expressions of opinion, historical inaccuracies, and glaring defects of execution."²⁶

²⁴ Unsigned review of *The Works of John Adams*, by John Adams, *The North American Review* Vol. 71, Issue 149 (October 1850): 407-445. Available from Making of America - Cornell University <<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=ABQ7578-0071-20>>

²⁵ Unsigned review of *The Works of John Adams* by John Adams, *The Living Age* Vol. 27, Issue 342 (December 7, 1850): 480. Available from Making of America - Cornell University <<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=ABR0102-0027-12>>

Historians placed considerable trust in Adams as a reliable eyewitness to important historical events. For example, Benson Lossing quoted Adams to describe the First Continental Congress and its members.²⁷ George Ticknor Curtis used Adams' *Works* to fill in information about Adams nominating George Washington as Commander-in-Chief in 1775.²⁸ Philip Henry Stanhope and Lucius Manlius Sargent utilized Adams' correspondence to fill in details about Adams' reception at the Court of St. James as the first minister from the United States to England after the Revolution.²⁹

Adams' opinion was also sought through his writings. Charles Sumner and Charles Elliott drew upon Adams' writings to illustrate the sentiments of people after the implementation of the Stamp Act, a tax levied against certain paper products.³⁰ Washington Irving quoted Adams quite a bit to describe things, from

²⁶ Unsigned review of *The Works of John Adams* by John Adams, *The Living Age*, Vol. 31, Issue 385 (October 4, 1851): 31-34. <<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=ABR0102-0031-3>>

²⁷ Benson J. Lossing, *The Pictorial Field-Book of the Revolution; or, Illustrations, by Pen and Pencil, of the History, Biography, Scenery, Relics, and Traditions of the War for Independence*. Vol. 2. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1851), p. 266. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/ABP1224.0002.001>>

²⁸ George Ticknor Curtis, *History of the Origin, Formation, & Adoption of the Constitution of the United States; With Notices of its Principal Framers*. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1854), pp. 42-44. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/AHM3967.0001.001>>

²⁹ [Philip Henry Stanhope, Earl Stanhope] *History of England, from the Peace of Utrecht to the Peace of Versailles, 1713-1783. By Lord Mahon*. Vol. VII. (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1854), pp. 109-110. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/ABA0645.0007.001>>; [Sargent], *Dealings With the Dead*. pp. 275-276.

³⁰ Charles Sumner, *Recent Speeches and Addresses [1851-1855]: By Charles Sumner*. (Boston: Higgins and Bradley, 1856), pp. 151-152. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/ABT5329.0001.001>>; Charles Wyllys Elliott, *The New England History, From the Discovery of the Continent by the Northmen, A. D. 986, to the Period When the Colonies Declared their Independence, A. D. 1776. By Charles W. Elliott*. Vol. 2 (New

Washington's headquarters and Washington himself to the presidential office.³¹ Irving also used Adams to describe conditions in France and their effects in the United States.³² Adams' *Works* was often quoted to describe Adams' contemporaries.³³ John Henry Sherburne quoted a letter from Adams to John Paul Jones to illustrate Adams' confidence and support of Jones in leading the United States Navy.³⁴ Lastly, Philip Henry Stanhope used Adams' diary to describe James Otis and the material state of the colonies at the ascension of George III.³⁵

Adams' diary proved useful as a window into Adams' personal life and himself. Two reviewers acknowledged this as the diary's importance and

York: Charles Scribner, 1857), p. 260. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/AJA1960.0001.001>>

³¹ Washington Irving, *Life of George Washington. By Washington Irving*. Vol. II (New York: G. P. Putnam and Co., 1857), pp. 287, 123. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/ABT4673.0002.001>> and *Ibid.*, Vol. V (1859), pp. 10-11. <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/ABT4673.0005.001>>

³² Irving, Vol. V (1859), pp. 197-198. < <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/ABT4673.0005.001>>

³³ Rev. J. D. D. Floy, Review of *The Women of the Revolution* by Elizabeth F. Ellet. *The Ladies' Repository: A Monthly Periodical, Devoted to Literature, Arts, and Religion* Vol. 10, Issue 7 (July 1850): 233-236. Available from Making of America Journal Articles - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/acg2248.1-10.007>>; see also George Van Santvoord, *Sketches of the Lives and Judicial Services of the Chief-Justices of the Supreme Court of the United States*. (New York: C. Scribner, 1854), pp. 106-107. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/AEW6190.0001.001>>; *The Documentary History of the State of New-York; Arranged Under Direction of the Hon. Christopher Morgan, Secretary of State*. E. B. O'Callaghan, ed. Vol. IV (Albany: Weed, Parsons & Co., 1851), p. 646, 1069. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/AFJ7943.0004.001>>, <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/AFJ7943.0002.001>>

³⁴ John Henry Sherburne, *The Life and Character of John Paul Jones, A Captain in the United States navy. During the Revolutionary War. By John Henry Sherburne*. (New York: Adrance, Sherman & Co., 1851), p. 227. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/ABN9824.0001.001>>

³⁵ See [Philip Henry Stanhope, Earl Stanhope], *History of England...*, p. 66, 271.

relevance to people of the 1850's. The first reviewer saw in the diary "many amusing pictures of domestic life" and hoped it would recover "deeds of moral heroism and self-sacrifice" which were, "in the present day... too much overlooked." In the end, *The Works* were "of great value as a text-book of personal and political facts and national history."³⁶ The second reviewer agreed that Adams' journal would be interesting to the "general reader" as it was a window to Adams' personality.³⁷

Reliance on Adams' writings in *The Works* created some confusion regarding how Thomas Jefferson was chosen to write the Declaration of Independence. George Ticknor Curtis in 1854 enumerated in his publication the more common conflicting stories. Much of the evidence was only available from what Adams and Jefferson recorded. Curtis mentioned Jefferson's papers, published in 1829; Jefferson's memoirs; Adams' autobiography in his *Works* and a number of letters written by both men on the subject as sources. Each source had a varying degree of detail and they often contradicted each other. Even things written by the same person, but in different years, could be contradictory.³⁸ Although the primary documents proved fallible, it was their lack of clarity that

³⁶ Unsigned review of *The Works of John Adams* by John Adams, *The Living Age* Vol. 27, Issue 342 (December 7, 1850): 480. Available from Making of America - Cornell University <<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=ABR0102-0027-12>>; see also Unsigned review of *The Works of John Adams* by John Adams, *New Englander and Yale Review* Vol. 11, Issue 42 (May 1853): 222-247. Available from Making of America - Cornell University <<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=ABQ0722-0011-35>>

³⁷ Unsigned review of *The Works of John Adams* by John Adams, *The Living Age*, Vol. 31, Issue 385 (October 4, 1851): 31-34. <<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=ABR0102-0031-3>>

³⁸ George Ticknor Curtis, *History of the Origin...*, pp. 81-88.

provoked further research. When two documents contradicted each other, others had to be found to illuminate the issue at hand. One writer's use of Adams' *Works* to clear Adams' name demonstrated this. Thomas Paine had accused Adams of being a part of the Conway Cabal, which was a plot to remove Washington from the position of Commander-in-Chief, and the reviewer dismissed that accusation in light of recently published letters.³⁹

As primary documents about the Revolution were made available during the middle of the nineteenth century, a few controversies cropped up concerning their use and abuse. Two reviewers of Philip Henry Stanhope's *History of England* identified the danger of quoting only parts of letters, taken out of context, to prove a point, and they used Adams' *Works* to point out inaccuracies in Stanhope's publication.⁴⁰ Despite the confusion and controversy, Adams' extensive body of writing solidified his position as a favorable historical character. Other roles given to Adams would not fare as well.

Controversial Historical Politician

In the quarter century between 1840 and 1865, political troubles dominated the nation. Conflicts between different political parties and sectional

³⁹ Unsigned review of "An Oration Delivered at the Celebration in Philadelphia of the 106th Anniversary of the Birthday of Thomas Paine by John Alberger." *North American Review* Vol. 57, Issue 120 (July 1843): 1-58. Available from Making of America - Cornell University <<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=ABQ7578-0057-3>>

⁴⁰ Unsigned review of *History of England, from the Peace of Utrecht to the Peace of Versailles, 1713-1783. By Lord Mahon* by Philip Henry Stanhope, Earl Stanhope. *The North American Review* Vol. 75, Issue 156 (July 1852): 124-208. Available from Making of America - Cornell University <<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=ABQ7578-0075-6>>; P.F., review of *History of England, from the Peace of Utrecht to the Peace of Versailles, 1713-1783. By Lord Mahon* by Philip Henry Stanhope, Earl Stanhope. *The Living Age* Vol. 44, Issue 560 (February 17, 1855): 387. Available from Making of America - Cornell University <<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=ABR0102-0044-9>>

interests intensified. Coping with the changes, historians looked back at the beginnings of party politics and tried to define the roots of the conflicts.

Adams was cast as a controversial historical politician, both in his own times' context and the context of politics in the 1850's. Adams' administration was generally treated as the breeding ground for party politics, as the election of 1796 was the first presidential election between political parties. Some historians saw Adams as a man vilified by the opposing party and defended his actions, especially his decision to dismiss some of his cabinet members after realizing they were working against him.⁴¹ Other old accusations against Adams were no longer deemed valid in light of subsequent acts. Jabez Hammond, for example, could not figure out why Alexander Hamilton had hated Adams so much. The text of Hamilton's *Letter on the Public Conduct and Character of John Adams* particularly puzzled Hammond, as well as Hamilton's motive for having the letter published. Ultimately Hammond dismantled Hamilton's objections to Adams and generally dismissed them.⁴² J. M. Elam pointed out that although censuring Adams and his administration for the Alien and Seditions Acts was merited, the fact that Jefferson and his administration did much the same later lessened the

⁴¹ Daniel Munger, *Political Landmarks*. pp. 18-19.; George Van Santvoord, *Sketches of the Lives and Judicial Services of the Chief-Justices of the Supreme Court of the United States*. pp. 346-347.

⁴² Jabez D. Hammond, *The History of Political Parties in the State of New-York, from the Ratification of the Federal Constitution to December, 1840*. Vol. I (Buffalo: Phinney & Co., 1850), pp. 147-151. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/AHM4858.0001.001>>

tarnish on Adams and his administration.⁴³ A writer in the *Southern Literary Messenger* made the same sort of connection between the Sedition Acts approved by Adams and a “later resolution, adopted by the Legislature of South Carolina,” which sounds much like Adams’ acts, and “yet South Carolina pronounced Mr. Adams’ law unconstitutional.”⁴⁴ However, when Adams’ influence over later political actions was considered, it was generally unfavorable.

When parallels were drawn between the old and current (1840’s-1850’s) political parties, Adams appeared to be the villain. John Henry Sherburne, according to a reviewer, thought he had a “becoming duty to re-animate” John Wood’s *History of the Administration of John Adams* in 1846 because it demonstrated that “long, very long will our country have to deplore the bias which the erratic and selfish course of both father and son have successively given to her counsels.”⁴⁵ Other historians more blatantly blamed Adams for current conditions. Hugh Garland claimed “for the sake of union, we submitted to the lowest state of degradation; the administration of John Adams. The name of this man calls up contempt and derision, wheresoever it is pronounced.” For Garland,

⁴³ J. M. Elam, “Letter to the Hon. H. S. Foote, of the U. S. Senate,” *The American Whig Review* Vol. 10, Issue 24 (Dec 1849): 562. Available from Making of America - Cornell University <<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=ABL5306-0010-116>>

⁴⁴ Phocion, review of *The Federal Administrations of Washington and the Elder Adams. Edited From the Papers of Oliver Wolcott, Secretary of the Treasury* by George Gibbs. *Southern Literary Messenger; Devoted to Every Department of Literature and the Fine Arts* Vol. 14, Issue 9 (September 1847): 559-563. Available from Making of America Journal Articles - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/acf2679.0013.009>>

⁴⁵ Unsigned review of *The Suppressed History of the Administration of John Adams* by John Wood, John Henry Sherburne, ed. *Southern Literary Messenger; Devoted to Every Department of Literature and the Fine Arts* Vol. 14, Issue 9 (September 1847): 563-566. Available from Making of America Journal Articles - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/acf2679.0013.009>>

Adams was personally responsible: “to the fantastic vanity of this political Malvolio may be distinctly traced our present unhappy condition.” Garland continued, “intoxicated not more by the fulsome adulation with which he was plied, than by the fumes of his own vanity, this poor old gentleman saw a visionary coronet suspended over his brow, and an airdrawn sceptre [sic] ‘the handle towards his hand,’ which attempting to clutch, he lost his balance, and disappeared never to rise again.”⁴⁶ The monarchical imagery accentuated his point that Adams had been a poisonous influence on American politics. Joseph Glover Baldwin encountered this in Virginia and was puzzled by it. “Nor did I ever hear a discussion in which old John Adams and Thomas Jefferson did not figure - as if an interminable dispute had been going on for so many generations between those disputatious personages: as if the quarrel had begun before time, but was not to end with it.” He continued, “but the strangest part of it to me was, that the dispute seemed to be going on without poor Adams’ having any defence [sic] or champion; and never waxed hotter than when both parties agreed in denouncing the man of Braintree as the worst of public sinners and the vilest of political heretics.”⁴⁷

The presence of powerful third parties in the 1850’s made politics even more tumultuous. When the Massachusetts legislature called for a constitutional

⁴⁶ Hugh A. Garland, *The Life of John Randolph of Roanoke*. By Hugh A. Garland. (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1851), p. 58. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/ABP2708.0002.001>>

⁴⁷ [Joseph Glover Baldwin], “Sketches of the Flush Times of Alabama, Part III,” *Southern Literary Messenger; Devoted to Every Department of Literature and the Fine Arts* Vol. 18, Issue 12 (December 1852): 746-756. Available from Making of America Journal Articles - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/acf2679.0018.012>>

convention in 1853, it was primarily to update the methods of determining representation in the state legislature, but it also addressed issues arising out of the presence of the Free-Soil Party, such as the challenge faced by candidates who required a majority to get elected.⁴⁸ Adams, as the constitution's original drafter, was often referred to in the debates surrounding the revision, and he was used as an authority and guidepost by members of all three parties. Specifically Adams was quoted on the importance of the separation of power in government, the need for property qualifications for voting, the importance of town meetings and the importance of the Massachusetts militia.⁴⁹

The presence of another third party, the Know-Nothing Party, also had historians looking back to the early days of political parties and Adams' role therein. The Know-Nothing Party rose quickly in popularity and enjoyed a surprising amount of power from about 1854 to 1856 for an upstart political party. Although short-lived, their rabid anti-immigrant stance had many people apprehensive.⁵⁰ James Hambleton saw a strong link between Adams' support of the Alien and Seditions Acts and the Know-Nothing Party. Hambleton described the arrest of Pennsylvanian Thomas Cooper under the Sedition Act in 1800 as "the next victim sacrificed to gratify John Adams' hatred of foreign born

⁴⁸ See Samuel Shapiro, "The Conservative Dilemma: The Massachusetts Constitutional Convention of 1853," *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 2. (June, 1960), pp. 207-224.

⁴⁹ *Official Report of the Debates and Proceedings in the State Convention: Assembled May 4th, 1853, to Revise and Amend the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*. Vol. 1 (Boston: White & Potter, 1853), pp. 828, 887. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/AEW7439.0001.001>>; *ibid.*, Vol. 2., pp. 18, 108. <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/AEW7439.0002.001>>

⁵⁰ *American History: A Survey*, ed. Alan Brinkley et. al. Tenth ed. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 1999), pp. 332-333.

Democrats.” Adams’ “blows were aimed principally at the accomplished Democratic writers whose pens were driving him to desperation.” Hambleton called the Federalists “the Know-Nothings of that day,” and expressed his fear in the precedents Adams had set.⁵¹ With the Know-Nothings’ roots in Adams’ policies, their sharp rise in power in the 1850’s alarmed Democrats. A decade later Democrats reacted to the Republican Party in the same way. Rushmore Horton in 1867 pointed out, “you have also seen, in previous chapters of this history, that the same monarchist party attempted to revolutionize or overthrow the free government our fathers did establish, while it was in power from 1796 to 1800, under the administration of old John Adams.” Horton continued, drawing a parallel between Adams and Abraham Lincoln. “This party, so long hating, so long opposing the free democratic government of our country, found in Abraham Lincoln a willing tool of its revolutionary and despotic principles.”⁵² From the Democrats’ view, both Adams and Lincoln had usurped power as president and run roughshod over free government.

On the other hand, Adams was quoted in a letter to Lincoln warning him about arbitrary power. “Words of John Adams, uttered in 1775, express the general habit and feeling of the American people: ‘Nip the shoots of arbitrary power in the bud’ is the only maxim which can ever preserve the liberties of any

⁵¹ James Pinkney Hambleton, *A Biographical Sketch of Henry A. Wise...*, pp. 65-66. Specifics about Thomas Cooper were found at The National Archives, “Teaching With Documents: *The United States vs. Thomas Cooper - A Violation of the Sedition Law*,” <<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/sedition-case/>>

⁵² [Rushmore G. Horton], *A Youth’s History of the Great Civil War in the United States, from 1861 to 1865*. (New York,: Van Evrie, Horton & Co., 1867), pp. 125, 23. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/ACP5632.0001.001>>. Horton cited as one of his sources John Wood’s *History of Administration of John Adams*.

people. When the people give way, their deceivers, betrayers and destroyers press open upon them so fast that there is no resisting afterwards." The author drew parallels between Adams' words and the general feeling of Americans in 1863 and warned Lincoln about current legislation, especially coming from Congress.⁵³ Edwin Wright also used Adams to prove the same point. "John Adams forcibly exclaims, 'Search for the *foundation* of Law and Government in the *frame of human nature*, in the *constitution* of the *intellectual and moral world*. Then let us see that *Truth, Liberty, Justice, and Benevolence* are its everlasting basis; - and that if these could be removed the superstructure is overthrown of course."⁵⁴ Adams as a historical character lent himself well to Whig, Free-Soil and later Republican arguments. Such is the case with slavery.

Anti-Slavery and Pro-Slavery

Rising tensions over slavery's expansion and its very existence from the 1840's to the 1860's created new roles for Adams. Most complimentary historians cast Adams as opposed to slavery's expansion and some asserted he was also an abolitionist, even though the concept of "abolitionist" came about after his death. The precedent of The Northwest Ordinance made it clear to anti-slavery advocates that many founders disapproved of the spread of slavery.⁵⁵ As

⁵³ "Military Coercion," *The Old Guard* Vol. 1, Issue 4 (April 1863): 79. Available from Making of America - Cornell University <<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=ABS9288-0001-32>>

⁵⁴ Edwin Wright, "The Sanction of All Law, Devine," *New Englander and Yale Review* Vol. 22, Issue 85 (October 1863): 629. Available from Making of America - Cornell University <<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=ABQ0722-0022-76>>

⁵⁵ See David Wilmot, "Speech of Mr. Wilmot, of Penn. on the Restriction of Slavery in the New Territories. House of Representatives, August 3, 1848," *The National Era* (Washington, D.C.),

Kingsley Bingham pointed out, “many of those who participated in [the Northwest Ordinance’s] enactment had been members of the Convention that framed the Constitution, and, therefore, may be supposed to have understood its true intent and meaning.”⁵⁶ Adams, for his approval of the admission of Indiana as a free territory in 1800, was remembered for approving not only a free Indiana, but also the conditions set by the Northwest Ordinance. The Northwest Ordinance precedent was evoked in the conflict about overturning the Missouri Compromise and the admission of Kansas in the mid-1850’s.⁵⁷ It was also used in the earlier debates concerning the admission of California in 1850. Charles Durkee identified “John Adams, Thomas Jefferson and their compatriots of 1776” as having the same Free-Soil principles as Free-Soilers in 1850.⁵⁸

August 17, 1848. Available in database: African American Newspapers: The 19th Century. Available from Accessible Archive Inc. Item #11625 <<http://www.accessible.com>>; J. R. Doolittle, “The Calhoun Revolution its Basis and its Progress. Speech of Hon. J. R. Doolittle, of Wisconsin, in the Senate of the United States, January 3, 1860,” *The National Era* (Washington, D.C.), January 26, 1860. Available in database: African American Newspapers: The 19th Century from Accessible Archive Inc. Item #82991 <<http://www.accessible.com>>

⁵⁶ Kingsley Bingham, “Speech of Mr. Bingham of Michigan on the Admission of California Delivered in the House of Representatives, June 4, 1850,” *The National Era* (Washington, D.C.), July 18, 1850. Available in database: African American Newspapers: The 19th Century from Accessible Archive Inc. Item #22446 <<http://www.accessible.com>>

⁵⁷ Although Kansas would not be admitted until 1861. Russell Sage, “Speech of Hon. Russell Sage, of New York. On the Profession and Acts of the President of the United States, the Repeal of the Missouri Compromise the Outrages in Kansas, and the Sectional Influence and Aggressions of the Slave Power. Delivered in the House of Representatives, August 6, 1856,” *The National Era* (Washington, D.C.), September 18, 1856. Available in database: African American Newspapers: The 19th Century from Accessible Archive Inc. Item #67321 <<http://www.accessible.com>>

⁵⁸ Charles Durkee, “Speech of Hon. Charles Durkee, of Wisconsin, on the California Question. Delivered in the House of Representatives, June 7, 1750 [1850],” *The National Era* (Washington, D.C.), July 4, 1850. Available in database: African American Newspapers: The 19th Century from Accessible Archive Inc. Item #67321 <<http://www.accessible.com>>

A few opposed Adams' use by anti-slavery forces and tried to use him for pro-slavery arguments. As W. G. Brownlow pointed out, Adams "signed Acts of Congress admitting Slave States into the Union." So did Washington, though they could have vetoed them. Adams also "signed the Act of Congress which repealed the *Wilmot Proviso ordinance* (organizing the North-western Territory as an anti-slavery Territory), organizing the Alabama and Mississippi Territories as *Slave Territories!*" [italics in original] Alongside Adams stood Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, and Hamilton, proving to Brownlow, "what an untruth Abolitionism utters, when it asserts that the early founders of our Republic were opposed to slavery."⁵⁹ The claim that Adams signed an act of congress which repealed the Wilmont Proviso is odd considering it was passed in 1846, fully twenty years after Adams' death.

Notwithstanding, Adams remained an anchor for the anti-slavery arguments. Not only had Adams, as abolitionists deduced through his actions, opposed the spread of slavery, he had been an abolitionist. In a speech printed in *The Colored American*, C. L. Remond took leave "to remind the meeting of the sentiments of John Adams" who had "advocated political and religious liberty, and he denounced slavery as offensive in the sight of God, as derogatory to the honor, and interests, and happiness of man, and as opposed to the decrees which had been promulgated from heaven of liberty, of peace, and good-will

⁵⁹ William Gannaway Brownlow, *Ought American Slavery to be Perpetuated?: A Debate Between Rev. W. G. Brownlow and Rev. A. Pryne. Held at Philadelphia, September, 1858* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., [1858]), pp. 200-201. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/ABT7160.0001.001>>

towards man.”⁶⁰ Charles Sumner, in a speech given before the United States Senate, was more blatant with the connection between Adams and anti-slavery arguments. “By the side of Washington... were illustrious men, whose lives and recorded words now rise in judgment,” explained Sumner, describing Washington’s inauguration. “There was John Adams, the Vice President - great vindicator and final negotiator of our national independence - whose soul, flaming with freedom, broke forth in the early declaration that “consenting to Slavery is a sacrilegious breach of trust,” and whose immitigable hostility to this wrong has been made immortal in his descendants.”⁶¹ Adams proclaiming slavery as a “sacrilegious breach of trust” was commonly quoted.⁶²

Adams’ approval of Jefferson’s original draft of the Declaration of Independence was also presented as proof he was an abolitionist. In that draft, Jefferson blamed slavery and the slave trade on George III and condemned him for opposing every attempt to outlaw or inhibit them. George Livermore described

⁶⁰ C. L. Remond, “Speech of Mr. C. L. Remond Exeter Hall, London,” *The Colored American* (New York), August 8, 1840. Available in database: African American Newspapers: The 19th Century from Accessible Archive Inc. Item #15290 <<http://www.accessable.com>>

⁶¹ Charles Sumner, “Freedom National, Slavery Sectional. Speech of Hon. Charles Sumner, of Mass., on His Motion to Repeal the Fugitive Slave Law, in the United States Senate, Thursday, August 26, 1852,” *The National Era* (Washington, D.C.), September 2, 1852. Available in database: African American Newspapers: The 19th Century from Accessible Archive Inc. Item #34214 <<http://www.accessable.com>> Also reprinted in *Frederick Douglass Paper* (Rochester, New York), October 1, 1852. Available in database: African American Newspapers: The 19th Century from Accessible Archive Inc. Item #34670 <<http://www.accessable.com>>

⁶² See Henry Wilson, “Defense of the Republican Party. Speech of Hon. Henry Wilson, of Massachusetts, On the President’s Message. In the Senate of the United States, December 19, 1856.” *The National Era* (Washington, D.C.) January 22, 1857. Available in database: African American Newspapers: The 19th Century from Accessible Archive Inc. Item #68325 <<http://www.accessable.com>>; “History, as Expounded by the Supreme Court,” *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine of American Literature, Science and Art* Vol. 9, Issue 53 (May 1857): 546. Available from Making of America - Cornell University <<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=ABK9283-0009-127>>

how Adams “thus expresses his feelings on seeing Mr. Jefferson’s first draught [of the Declaration of Independence]: ‘I was delighted with its high tone, and the flights of oratory with which it abounded, especially that concerning negro slavery; which, though I knew his Southern brethren would never suffer to pass in Congress, I certainly would never oppose.’”⁶³ It was obvious to Horace Greely that because the slavery clause in Jefferson’s original draft made it past Adams and Franklin’s review before being reported to congress that Adams and Franklin approved of the clause.⁶⁴

Arguments opposing the Fugitive Slave law invoked the violated rights of white northerners who were coerced into helping southerners reclaim fugitive slaves. “We have no earthy interest in protecting the odious parts of the Constitution,” one newspaper writer wrote. “We will never be catchers of Negroes.” If southerners wanted their slaves back, they were on their own, according to this writer. “We Whigs, who in the North have sacrificed ourselves, our popularity, our power, to preserve the consecrated instrument a George Washington and a John Adams bequeathed us, are absolved from all obligations to continue this self-sacrifice...”⁶⁵ S. E. Sewall quoted John Adams’ *Essay on*

⁶³ George Livermore, *An Historical Research Respecting the Opinions of the Founders of the Republic on Negroes as Slaves, as Citizens, and as Soldiers. Read before the Massachusetts Historical Society. August 14, 1862. By George Livermore.* (Boston: A. Williams and Co., 1863), p. 18. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/ABL4937.0001.001>>

⁶⁴ Horace Greely, *The American Conflict: A History of the Great Rebellion in the United States of America, 1860-64: Its Causes, Incidents, and Results: Intended to Exhibit Especially its Moral and Political Phases, With the Drift and Progress of American Opinion Respecting Human Slavery from 1776 to the Close of the War for the Union.* By Horace Greeley. Vol. 1. (Hartford, CT: O. D. Case and Co., 1865), p. 35. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/AAW9128.0002.001>>

the Canon and Feudal Law in a speech given to the Senate. The speech was later printed in newspapers. "Be it remembered that liberty must at all hazards be supported!" Sewall quoted from Adams, "We have a right to it." The fugitive slave law was viewed by Sewall as a violation of Northerner's rights and liberties because they could be manipulated by southerners. Northerners were no longer free to pursue their own consciences; they were subordinate to southerners' wishes. Sewall went on, using Adams' words to establish that basic freedoms are inherent and equal with any legislation. "Liberties are not the grants of princes or parliaments, but original rights, conditions of original contracts, co-equal with prerogative, and co-eval [sic] with government."⁶⁶ Charles Sumner used this same quote later, in February 1854, in arguing against the "repeal of the prohibition of slavery north of thirty-six degrees thirty minutes."⁶⁷

Adams was not often the first founder quoted for anti-slavery arguments. Ironically, that position fell to the slaveholders Jefferson and Washington. Adams was absent from the arguments of the more prominent politicians of the time, such as Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglass. For those who did rely on

⁶⁵ "Correspondence of the New York Express. Presidential Movements. Washington, April 17," *The National Era* (Washington, D.C.), April 29, 1852. Available in database: African American Newspapers: The 19th Century from Accessible Archive Inc. Item #6492 <<http://www.accessable.com>>

⁶⁶ S. E. Sewall, "From the Boston Commonwealth. Speech of Hon. S. E. Sewall, of Middlesex, in the Senate, on the Bill to Protect Personal Liberty," *Frederick Douglass Paper* (Rochester, New York), July 1, 1852. Available in database: African American Newspapers: The 19th Century from Accessible Archive Inc. Item #33340 <<http://www.accessable.com>>

⁶⁷ Charles Sumner, "The Landmark of Freedom. Speech of Hon. Charles Sumner Against the Repeal of the Prohibition of Slavery North of Thirty-Six Degrees Thirty Minutes. In Senate, February 21, 1854," *The National Era* (Washington, D. C.), March 2, 1854. Available in database: African American Newspapers: The 19th Century from Accessible Archive Inc. Item #48305 <<http://www.accessable.com>>

Adams, his words made an impression. William Henry Hurlbert quoted Adams concerning the differences between north and south, "I dread the consequences of this dissimilitude of character, and without the utmost caution on both sides, and the most considerate forbearance with one another, and prudent condescensions [sic] on both sides, they will certainly be fatal." Poignant words for 1864. Hulbert added, "John Adams hoped to see the danger conquered by an 'alteration of Southern Constitutions,' but it was decreed that the cotton-gin, California, and Richard Cobden, should disappoint this hope."⁶⁸

Adams' *Works* often caught the attention of the anti-slavery argument. A number of prominent African-American newspapers in the 1850's printed and reprinted favorable reviews of *The Works* as they were published. A review of volume two called Adams "a fine Representative of a noble race of men now passed away." Not only was Adams a "scholar and a high-toned gentlemen," but "he held himself not above the commonest duties and labors of every-day life" according to the reviewer. Perhaps most revealing of all, Adams "preserved, through all the cares, vexations, and temptations of a long public career, a humble and child-like dependence upon God. He was a noble man..." The reviewer "cordially commend this entire work to the venerators of the olden time to the lovers of patriotism and of patriots, now, alas, becoming an extinct race in the high places of our land."⁶⁹ Adams the scholar who, paradoxically, was not

⁶⁸ William Henry Hurlbert, *General McClellan and the Conduct of the War. By William Henry Hurlbert.* (New York: Sheldon and Co., 1864), p. 27. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/ABJ6797.0001.001>>

above common duties and labors was appealing to 1850's African-Americans. Jefferson had long been touted as an every-day man, but Adams was, in reality, even more so (though that fact often went unnoticed). A reviewer of volume seven stated "these momentos [sic] are most important, as developing the substantial unity of his system of polity, from first to last - a feature which has not been hitherto pointed out so clearly as justice to him would seem to demand. The publication sheds much light upon the movements and motives of prominent actors in the Revolution."⁷⁰ Value was placed on tracing the evolution of Adams' thoughts on government and politics. Such a perusal could help explain why slavery had not been abolished in 1776 or 1789. The reviews in the African-American newspapers certainly saw Adams as a moral person in history and a valuable eye-witness to that history.⁷¹ In the end, according to one writer in an African-American newspaper, "the more we read of old John Adams, the more we felt that he was the very soul of the Revolution. His letters are fascinating - every word is instinct with life... they show his intensity, his ever-abounding energy and activity. He had vitality enough for a dozen ordinary men."⁷² While it

⁶⁹ G.G., review of *The Works of John Adams*, by John Adams, *The National Era* (Washington, D. C.), February 27, 1851. Available in database: African American Newspapers: The 19th Century from Accessible Archive Inc. Item #29534 <<http://www.accessible.com>>

⁷⁰ Unsigned review of *The Works of John Adams*, By John Adams, *The National Era* (Washington, D. C.), March 24, 1853. Available in database: African American Newspapers: The 19th Century from Accessible Archive Inc. Item #36516 <<http://www.accessible.com>>

⁷¹ Unsigned review of *The Works of John Adams*, By John Adams, *The National Era* (Washington, D. C.), November 17, 1853. Available in database: African American Newspapers: The 19th Century from Accessible Archive Inc. Item #38086 <<http://www.accessible.com>>

⁷² Unsigned review of *The Works of John Adams*, by John Adams, *The National Era* (Washington, D. C.), December 11, 1856. Available in database: African American Newspapers: The 19th Century from Accessible Archive Inc. Item #67985 <<http://www.accessible.com>>

was likely these reviews were written by whites, it was not clear. The fact that they were published in African-American newspapers demonstrated the respect the African-American editors had for Adams.

Horace Greely in 1865 quoted the clearest statement in Adams' *Works* against slavery. "The turpitude, the inhumanity, the cruelty, and the infamy of the African commerce, have been so impressively represented to the public by the highest powers of eloquence, that nothing I could say would increase the just odium in which it is, and ought to be, held." Greely continued quoting,

*Every measure of prudence, therefore, ought to be assumed for the eventual total extirpation of Slavery from the United States. I have, through my whole life, held the practice of slavery in such abhorrence, that I have never owned a negro or any other slave: though I have lived for many years in times when the practice was not disgraceful; when the best men in my vicinity thought it not inconsistent with their character; and when it has cost me thousands of dollars for the labor and subsistence of free men, which I might have saved by the purchase of negroes at times when they were very cheap. [italics in original].*⁷³

These stirring words made it evident to Greely where Adams stood on the question of slavery.

Yet in a strange twist of rhetoric, Adams' words were also on occasion used to support pro-slavery arguments. Robert Mercer Taliaferro Hunter used Adams' *Defense of the Constitutions* to support the movement for total representation of slaves in population counts instead of keeping the three-fifths compromise.⁷⁴ Adams was also seen as pro-slavery because he had once

⁷³ Horace Greely, *The American Conflict...*, pp. 51-52.; George Livermore, *An Historical Research*, p. 41.

written that slaves are essentially equal to laborers, fishermen in Massachusetts for example, in contribution to the wealth of a state and so should be counted equally. If they were equal in economical contribution, then why not tax them equally as well?⁷⁵ It was tricky argument that slaves were equal enough to be counted as whole persons, but not equal enough to be protected under the Constitution or even allowed basic human rights.⁷⁶ “One of your own most distinguished statesmen and patriots,” Robert Toombs pointed out, “President John Adams - said that the difference to the slave was ‘imaginary.’ ‘What matters is... whether a landlord employing ten laborers on his farm gives them annually as much money as will buy them the necessaries of life, or gives them those necessaries at shorthand?’” It had been proven that a worker was better off receiving his wages in goods, Toombs claimed, as southerners paid their slaves, instead of in “their supposed pecuniary value.”⁷⁷ Although the examples of

⁷⁴ Robert Mercer Taliaferro Hunter, “The Massachusetts Proposition for Abolishing the Slave Representation as Guaranteed by the Constitution,” *The Southern Literary Messenger; Devoted to Every Department of Literature and the Fine Arts* Volume 11, Issue 8 (August 1845): 449-467. Available from Making of America Journal Articles - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/acf2679.0011.008>>

⁷⁵ See “The Southern Platform; or, Manual of Southern Sentiment on the Subjects of Slavery,” *The National Era* (Washington, D.C.), June 9, 1853. Available in database: African American Newspapers: The 19th Century from Accessible Archive Inc. Item #37030 <<http://www.accessible.com>>; “[Response to a Speech Made by Lincoln on Washington’s Birthday in Philadelphia.]” *The New York Herald*. February 24, 1861. Available in database: The Civil War: A Newspaper Perspective from Accessible Archive Inc. Item #587 <<http://www.accessible.com>>

⁷⁶ “Judge Abel P. Upshur,” *Southern Literary Messenger; Devoted to Every Department of Literature and the Fine Arts* Vol. 7, Issue 12 (December 1841): 865-873. Available from Making of America Journal Articles - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/acf2679.0007.012>>; “The Rights of the Slave States,” *The Southern Quarterly Review* Vol. 3, Issue 5 (Jan 1851): 101-145. Available from Making of America Journal Articles - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/acp1141.2-03.005>>

Adams' words being used to defend pro-slavery are few, they illustrate the effort partisans made to use history justify current conditions by invoking luminaries from the past.

⁷⁷ Robert Toombs, "Slavery - Its Constitutional Status, and Its Influence on Society and on the Colored Race," *Debow's Review, Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial Progress and Resources* Volume 20, Issue 5 (May 1856): 581a-605a. Available from Making of America Journal Articles - University of Michigan <<http://name.umd.umich.edu/acg1336.1-20.005>>

CHAPTER III

A MATURE BIOGRAPHY: ADAMS FIFTY YEARS AFTER HIS DEATH

I have little faith in history. I read it as I do romance, believing what is probable and rejecting what I must...¹

After the United States was torn asunder by secession and Civil War, writers tried to heal the separations, even as reconstruction dragged on past 1874 when Charles Francis Adams reprinted the biography of John Adams from the *Works* as independent volumes. The common history of the Revolution served as grounds for reconciliation between the most polarized groups that split during the Civil War.² A result was a more sophisticated “warts and all” portrayal of John Adams as a historical character as American historical identity was reexamined.

Healing the Chasm

A few authors pioneered reuniting the nation using its common history as a theme before the war began. Jesse Ames Spencer in 1858 used a letter from Adams to Abigail Adams to describe how members of the First Continental Congress overcame their differences to pick a congressional chaplain. Spencer thought it was significant that so many men from varying backgrounds and religions were able to immediately compromise with each other. Spencer also showed that it was a time of adversity that brought them to the compromise. “You

¹ John Adams to Jedidiah Morse 4 March 1815 in John Adams, *The Works of John Adams*. Charles France Adams, ed. Vol. 10. (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1856), p. 133.

² See Van Tassel, pp. 158-160.

must remember this was the next morning after we heard the horrible rumor of the cannonade of Boston. I never saw a greater effect upon an audience," Spencer quoted Adams.³

Adams was an ideal focal point for coming together according to Rufus Choate in 1862, because Adams had held universal appeal. Adams' "eloquence alone seemed to have met every demand of the time; as a question of right, as a question of prudence, as a question of immediate opportunity, as a question of feeling, as a question of conscience, as a question of historical and durable and innocent glory..." according to Choate. Adams

presented [independence] in all its aspects, to every passion and affection, - to the burning sense of wrong, exasperated at length beyond control by the shedding of blood; to grief, anger, self-respect; to the desire of happiness and of safety; to the sense of moral obligation, commanding that the duties of life are more than life; to courage... to the craving of the colonial heart, of all hearts, for the reality and the ideal of country... to that large and heroic [sic] ambition which would build States, that imperial philanthropy which would open to liberty an asylum here, and give to the sick heart, hard fare, fettered conscience of the children of the Old World, healing, plenty, and freedom to worship God.⁴

A renewed fascination with the tandem deaths of Adams and Jefferson was an appropriate way to heal the breach. John Watson in 1870 wrote "it has been calculated... the chance of their both living fifty years longer, and dying at

³ Jesse Ames Spencer, *History of the United States. From the Earliest Period to the Administration of James Buchanan*. Vol. 1. (New York: Johnson, Fry and Co., 1858), p. 320. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/ABJ2821.0001.001>>

⁴ "The Eloquence of Revolutionary Periods. A Lecture Delivered before the Mechanic Apprentices' Library Association, February 19, 1857," *The Works of Rufus Choate, with a Memoir of His Life*. Samuel Gilman Brown, ed. (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1862), pp. 460-461. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/AAN2933.0001.001>>

their expiration, is only one in twelve hundred millions!"⁵ By 1871, Sarah Randolph was able to relate a story that had an element of sectionalism, but present it as comical.

There was living in Albemarle, at the time of Jefferson's death, an enthusiastic democrat, who, admiring him beyond all men, thought that, by dying on the 4th of July, he had raised himself and his party one step higher in the temple of fame. Then came the news that John Adams had died on the same great day. Indignant at the bare suggestion of such a thing, he at first refused to believe it, and, when he could no longer discredit the news, exclaimed, in a passion, that "it was a damned Yankee trick."⁶

Unifying Words

Adams' writings were fertile ground as historians sought out examples of unity among the founders. The founders might have disagreed on issues in the Revolution, but they still fought against a common enemy. Adams' words were used by Richard Frothingham in 1862 to describe the situation in Boston as troops began to be quartered there in 1768-1770 in the wake of protests over the Townsend Acts. "Their very appearance in Boston was a strong proof to me that the determination in Great Britain to subjugate us was too deep and inveterate ever to be altered by us," quoted Frothingham, "for everything we could do was

⁵ John F. Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania, in the Olden Time; Being a Collection of Memoirs, Anecdotes, and Incidents of the City and its Inhabitants and of the Earliest Settlements of the Inland Part of Pennsylvania, from the Days of the Founders... Embellished with engravings, by T.H. Mumford.* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1870), p. 308. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/AAW1040.0001.001>>

⁶ Sarah Randolph, *The Domestic Life of Thomas Jefferson. Comp. from Family Letters and Reminiscences, by His Great-Granddaughter, Sarah N. Randolph.* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1871), p. 421. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/ABP5527.0001.001>>

misrepresented, and nothing we could say was credited.”⁷ The tension Adams’ words evoked demonstrated that the nation had been unified at least to the extent of fighting a common enemy, and sectional tensions had been the smaller issue. The same sort of effect was achieved by Samuel Drake in 1873 when he used Adams’ words to describe Boston just before the Boston Massacre. Boston “was full of troops, and through the whole succeeding fall and winter a regiment was exercised by Major Small directly in front of my house.”⁸ Adams portrayed a quiet intrusion of the soldiers upon the citizenry; not yet confrontational but always visible, always there.

The renewal of correspondence between Adams and Jefferson in their retirement years showed how friends, then enemies, could become friends again. Jefferson’s great-granddaughter, Sarah Randolph, reprinted some of the letters in 1871. The letters reveal Adams and Jefferson as retirees, reminiscing about their pasts, interacting with events facing the next generation of Americans, and sharing the trials of growing old.⁹ It could easily be a source of inspiration for Northerners and Southerners trying to reunite and an analogy for the nation as a whole.

Adams’ writings also provided examples of seemingly prophetic statements. Prophecy was a way of coping during uncertain times. If Adams’

⁷ Richard Frothingham, “The Sam Adams Regiments in the Town of Boston,” *The Atlantic Monthly* Vol. 10, Issue 58 (August 1862): 188. Available from Making of America - Cornell University <<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=ABK2934-0010-26>>

⁸ Samuel Adams Drake, *Old Landmarks and Historic Personages of Boston. By Samuel Adams Drake*. (Boston: J.R. Osgood and Co., 1873), pp. 125-126. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umd.umich.edu/AFJ7482.0001.001>>

⁹ See Sarah Randolph, *The Domestic Life of Thomas Jefferson*.

statements made one hundred years previous could be proven correct by writers in the 1860's and 1870's, it opened the possibility that the Civil War was fate or destined and things would turn out for the better. *Scientific American*, noted in 1860 that "our national anniversary was celebrated this year in the time-honored way, by... gunpowder; and there were the usual incidents of accidents and crime, furnishing the newspapers, for a week after, with frequent items of conflagration, explosions, maimings and deaths. So another year has verified the prediction of John Adams." While it sounds as if it is criticizing Adams, the article is actually advocating for safer fireworks.¹⁰ Edward Everett wondered in an 1860 speech if Adams was prophetic and asked "has 'the gloom' which, in the language of Adams, shrouded the 4th of July, 1776, given way on this 4th of July, 1860, 'to those rays of light and glory' which he predicted? Has 'the end' as he fondly believed it would do, proved thus far to be more than 'worth all the means'?" Everett answers, for Adams most certainly. He obtained the highest office in the country, the presidency, and in his retirement, saw his son also rise to the same. As for the country as a whole, the answer is much less clear.¹¹

Everett would return to Adams the prophet in an 1870 publication emphasizing a letter Adams had written in 1755. "John Adams," according to Everett, "took the lead, the first individual, as it seems to me, who formed and

¹⁰ "Improvements in Fire-works Wanted," *Scientific American* New Series, Vol. 3, Issue 5 (July 28, 1860): 80. Available from Making of America - Cornell University <<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=ABF2204-1003-7>>; See John Adams to Abigail Adams 3 July 1776.

¹¹ Edward Everett, "Mr. Everett's Fourth of July Oration," *The Living Age* Vol. 66, Issue 844 (August 4, 1860): 286-287. Available from Making of America - Cornell University <<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=ABR0102-0066-112>>; "Primitive Evangelism and its Lessons," *New Englander and Yale Review* Vo. 18, Issue 72 (November 1860): 967-968. Available from Making of America - Cornell University <<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=ABQ0722-0018-208>>

expressed a distinct idea of American Independence.” In the letter, “he predicted the expulsion of the French from the continent, and the establishment of an independent government, on the basis of the union of the colonies, fortified by a controlling naval power.” Adams wrote this “before the open commencement of the war which removed the French from the continent, long before the new financial policy of Great Britain had roused the spirit of James Otis and Patrick Henry; twenty-one years before the blood of Lexington was shed.” In the end, “for twenty-one years, at least, John Adams had cherished the vision of independence.” What is more, Adams helped lead the country through his predictions to see it fully realized in his lifetime.¹²

Charles Sumner in 1867 was also interested in Adams’ prediction of the manner of Fourth of July celebrations, and noted Adams’ 1755 prediction that America would become more populated than England and his 1780 prediction that stated that English was destined to become the next world language.¹³ Sumner also saw Adams’ opening to *The Defense of the Constitutions* as prophetic. “Thirteen governments,’ he says plainly, ‘... *which are destined to spread over the northern part of that whole quarter of the globe, is a great point gained in favor of the rights of mankind.*”¹⁴ J. Arthur Partridge noted another

¹² Edward Everett, *Orations and Speeches on Various Occasions*. Vol. 1. (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1870), pp. 566-567. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/ANY2345.0001.001>>

¹³ Charles Sumner, “Prophetic Voices About America. A Monograph.” *The Atlantic Monthly* Vol. 20, Issue 119 (September 1867): 281-283. Available from Making of America - Cornell University <<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=ABK2934-0020-45>>

¹⁴ Charles Sumner, *Speech of Hon. Charles Sumner, of Massachusetts, on the Cession of Russian America to the United States*. (Washington: Congressional Globe Office, 1867), p. 13.

Adams quote that could be seen as prophetic. “Soon after the Reformation, a few people came over into this new world for conscience sake. This apparently trivial incident may *transfer the great seat of empire into America*. [italics in original]”¹⁵

Critical Analysis

The authors who did not balk from controversies examined them with a more critical eye than their predecessors.¹⁶ When old controversies from Adams’ life were dredged up by authors, reviewers criticized them for doing so. The controversy between Adams and Alexander Hamilton was invoked by Hamilton’s son John, which caught the attention of a reviewer in 1858. “It is very clear that he is the faithful depository of his [father’s] political antipathies. At the earliest possible moment the hereditary rancor against John Adams bursts forth, and it bubbles up again whenever an opening occurs or can be made.”¹⁷ The reviewer continues, as this volume is just the beginning,

we tremble to think of what yet awaits the Second President...
What we have here we conceive to be the mere sockets of the
gallows of fifty cubits’ height on which this New England Mordecai
is to be hanged up as an example to all malefactors of his class.
We make no protest against this summary procedure, if the
Biographer of the Republic think it due to the memory of his father;

Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan
<<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/AAZ9604.0001.001>>

¹⁵ J. Arthur Partridge, *The Making of the American Nation, or, The Rise and Decline of Oligarchy in the West*. By J. Arthur Partridge. (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1866), p. 242. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan
<<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/ABK9452.0001.001>>

¹⁶ See Van Tassel, pp. 161-170.

¹⁷ Unsigned review of *History of the United States of America, as Traced in the Writings of Alexander Hamilton and his Contemporaries* by John C. Hamilton. Vol. I. *The Atlantic Monthly* Vol. 1, Issue 4 (February 1858): 507-509. Available from Making of America - Cornell University
<<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=ABK2934-0001-108>>

but we would submit that he has begun rather early in the day to bind the victim doomed to deck the ferialia of his hero.”¹⁸

This sort of thing was hardly one-sided. Adams’ letters to William Cunningham were discussed and quoted again, as was John Wood’s suppressed *History*. Each showed Adams to be vehemently anti-Hamilton, though in this particular case Adams’ words were taken at face value to make Aaron Burr look better than Hamilton.¹⁹ Joel Moody in 1872 compared Adams and Thomas Paine, much to the benefit of the latter. In the winter of 1776-1777, according to Moody, when congress had to be appealed to repeatedly for assistance to keep the army together, Adams, “who said that Jefferson had stolen his ideas from him to put into the Declaration of Independence,” had deserted his post as Secretary of War. “Where is the chief representative from New England, this “Colossus” of debate, this chief of the war committee?” Moody asks. “Where is John Adams in this darkest hour of his country's trial? He has deserted her; he went home on the 13th of October after the first reverse, and is “brave in his home by the sea,” but will not come back till four months are past...”²⁰ Although it appeared Moody viewed Adams as a coward, he was actually out to show Adams’ meanness. Adams “came back to Congress, not willing to be called “a sunshine patriot” in his home by the sea. But it was not cowardice which made this chief of the war committee desert his post in the most

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ “The Character of Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton Compared,” *The Old Guard* Vol. 3, Issue 9 (September 1865): 416-417. Available from Making of America - Cornell University <<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=ABS9288-0003-121>>

²⁰ [Joel Moody], *Junius Unmasked: or Thomas Paine the Author of the Letters of Junius, and the Declaration of Independence*. (Washington, D. C.: J. Gray & Co., 1872), pp. 297-298. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/ABA0942.0001.001>>

trying months of his country - it was downright meanness of the temper.”²¹

Adams, Moody noted, “four years after he [Paine] is dead writes to Jefferson, “Joel Barlow was about to record Tom Paine as the great author of the American Revolution. If he was, I desire that my name may be blotted out forever from its record.”” Adams’ words made Moody furious. “This came from the man who twice deserted his post in the trying hour of his country; once for four months when at the head of the war committee, and once for seven months when president of the nation.” Adams wanted to be “blotted out,” says Moody, because of this. “No!” Moody exclaims,

John Adams, your name will live forever on the records of your country. You were sometimes a great man. But by the side of Thomas Paine... you stand thus: John Adams, Member of Congress, the Colossus of debate, signer of the Declaration of Independence, famous in the world, chief of the war committee, on whom great trusts were imposed, in whom great faith was had, in the first trying crisis of the new nation deserted her. *Brave in his home by the sea* [italics in original].²²

While this was a valiant attempt to make Adams an unsavory figure, it teetered on only one accusation. It would not be the only time Adams was sacrificed to make some other historical figure look better.

A reviewer of *The Life of Aaron Burr* noticed that the author had occasion to mention Adams “and salutes him thus: “Glorious, delightful, honest John Adams! An American John Bull! The Comic Uncle of this exciting drama!” He then calls him “a high-mettled game-cock,” and says “he made a splendid show

²¹ Ibid., p. 300.

²² Ibid., pp. 318-319.

of fight.”” The reviewer identifies these sort of comments as “foibles and vanities.”²³

Adams also had an interesting role in the 1868 impeachment trial of Andrew Johnson. He was used for a couple of precedents he set as president to support the defense’s case, and particular attention was paid to the circumstances surrounding Adams’ dismissal of his Secretary of State, Timothy Pickering. One of the charges leveled at Johnson was the conditions under which he dismissed a cabinet member and Adams’ precedent disallowed that charge to be grounds for impeachment.²⁴

Sophisticated Analysis

Part of knowing the whole person was seeing everything about that person for what it was and not being sycophantic or glossing over anything that was unsavory or undignified. To fully understand Adams, his faults and strengths had to be acknowledged and assessed together as a whole. As Adams had long been a polarizing figure, meeting in the middle by acknowledging and accepting Adams for who he was as a whole was a symbol of unification. This too had its roots in a few publications before the war.

Jesse Ames Spencer in 1858 acknowledged Adams as an “undoubtedly a man of ability and purity of character; but he was also quick, inflammable,

²³ Unsigned review of *The Life of Aaron Burr* by J. Parton. *The Atlantic Monthly* Vol. 1, Issue 5 (March 1858): 597-598. Available from Making of America - Cornell University <<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=ABK2934-0001-124>>

²⁴ *Trial of Andrew Johnson, President of the United States, Before the Senate of the United States, on Impeachment by the House of Representatives for High Crimes and Misdemeanors*. Vol. 1. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1868), p. 362-363, 365-366. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/AEW5648.0001.001>>; *Ibid.*, Vol. 2. p. 37, 195-196. <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/AEW5648.0002.001>>

sanguine, impatient of opposition, and desirous of popular applause.” Spencer compared what two authors, George Gibbs and Charles Francis Adams had to say about Adams, the former censorious, the latter sympathetic. Who was more accurate in their assessment, Spencer wanted to know. “Both Mr. Gibbs and Mr. C. F. Adams confess, that the materials for forming a correct judgment are few, not readily accessible, and largely imperfect,” Spencer’s footnote states. So “the student of history will compare and contrast the two volumes just referred to, and, weighing carefully the evidence as far as it is yet before the public, will endeavor to obtain a just and right view of the last years of power of the federal party.”²⁵

According to Robert Ormsby, Adams “was a man of superior judgment, extreme clearness of views, incorruptible integrity, unblemished honor, and unexcelled patriotism. When the question of the formation of a government for these states arose, Adams was, with other statesmen, in favor of a strong and durable one.” Ormsby, writing in 1859, presented a different take on the old accusations against Adams and his presidency, which “was not essentially different from that of Washington” although “at his recommendation the so-called alien and sedition laws were passed, which were used by his enemies much to his disadvantage.” But they did not represent who Adams was or what he stood for, according to Ormsby. “They were measures of too little consequence to deserve much consideration, as they indicate nothing in regard to the political principles of Mr. Adams. The laws in question might have been wise, or unwise,

²⁵ Jesse Ames Spencer, *History of the United States*. Vol. 2. (New York: Johnson, Fry and Co., [c1858]), p. 418, 517-518. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/ABJ2821.0002.001>>

without reasonably affecting his standing as a statesman or patriot.”²⁶ Also, “the establishment of a navy was one of the patriotic accomplishments of the administration of John Adams,” Ormsby pointed out, “for which Democrats ought to venerate and love his memory; for to that navy were they indebted for the glory of the war that has given them such a permanent hold upon the affections of the American people.”²⁷

Also in 1859, a writer in *The Democratic Review* acknowledged that although “John Adams was a federalist,” he was “nevertheless, an honorable, pure-minded man; and while we have ever regarded his domestic governmental policy as repugnant to the genius of our republican system, his love of country was never doubted, nor his attachment to her institutions questioned.”²⁸

E. P. Whipple saw continuity instead of division in Adams as he conceived Adams’ life as a whole. “Statesmen are... forces long before they are leaders of party, prime-ministers, and presidents.” Whipple continued, “are not the energies employed in preparing the way for new laws and new policies of more historical significance than the mere outward form of their enactment and inauguration?”

Whipple ended by asking,

did [Adams] lose in mature life a single racy or splenetic characteristic of the young statesman of the Colonial period? Is

²⁶ Robert McKinley Ormsby, *A History of the Whig Party, or Some of its Main Features; With a Hurried Glance at the Formation of Parties in the United States, and the Outlines of the History of the Principal Parties of the Country to the Present Time, etc., etc.* By R. McKinley Ormsby... (Boston: Crosby, Nichols and Co., 1859), p. 55. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/AHM4905.0001.001>>

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

²⁸ “Continental Policy of the United States - The Acquisition of Cuba,” *The Democratic Review* Vol. 43, Issue 1 (April 1859): 35-36. Available from Making of America - Cornell University <<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=AGD1642-0043-3>>

there, indeed, any break in that unity of nature which connects the second President of the United States with the child John Adams, the boy John Adams, the tart, blunt, and bold, the sagacious and self-reliant, young Mr. Adams, the plague and terror of the Tories of Massachusetts?²⁹

Adams' earlier achievements, according to Whipple, were more important than what he did as president. His successes and strengths should not become hidden under failures and slander.

Martin Van Buren in his *Inquiry into the Origin and Course of Political Parties in the United States*, published posthumously in 1867, recognized and accepted the faults that his contemporaries and historians perceived in Adams, but did not allow those perceived faults to tarnish Adams' whole person. Van Buren acknowledged that Adams "left our shores upon his foreign mission a noble specimen of a republican statesman... but in respect to his political opinions he returned an altered man." Van Buren also noted Adams' *Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America* "excited painful emotions in the breasts of most of his Revolutionary associates" because it contained "sentiments and opinions, so disparaging to a form of government which had been the unceasing object of their desire." This abandonment had damaged Adams in the minds of Americans, according to Van Buren, because "they had confided so fully, and upon whose cooperation, in securing to them the

²⁹ E. P. Whipple, "Young Men in History," *The Atlantic Monthly* Vol. 16, Issue 93 (July 1865): 6. Available from Making of America - Cornell University <<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=ABK2934-0016-3>>

full enjoyment of the political rights for the acquisition of which they had endured so many perils, they had largely depended.”³⁰

Nevertheless, Van Buren still held Adams in high esteem. According to Van Buren, Adams’ depth and consistency of character withstood examination by contemporaries, self-examination and later generations’ examinations. Adams was still “the same ‘always honest man’ that he was three quarters of a century ago when that high praise was accorded to him by his not too partial friend, Benjamin Franklin, in a communication not designed to be over civil.” In the end, Van Buren wrote “no subsequent errors of opinion, nothing short of personal dishonor and degradation, of which he was incapable, could extinguish a claim to the enduring gratitude and respect of a nation founded on such services.”³¹

George Bancroft also offered an analytical description of Adams in volume eight of his *History*, published in 1868. Adams was often vain to a fault, according to Bancroft, “but the stain did not reach beyond the surface; it impaired the lustre [sic], not the hardy integrity of his character.” Although “he could not look with complacency on those who excelled him” Adams’ “envy... had hardly a tinge of malignity, and never led him to derelictions for the sake of revenge.” Bancroft identified Adams’ anger, which could “break out into uncontrollable rage... did not so much drive him to do wrong, as to do right ungraciously.” Bancroft identified Adams as “indiscreetly talkative, and almost thought aloud; whenever he sought

³⁰ Martin Van Buren, *Inquiry into the Origin and Course of Political Parties in the United States. By the late ex-President Martin Van Buren.* Martin, Abraham, and John Van Buren, ed. (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1867), pp. 255-258. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umd.umich.edu/AEW6878.0001.001>>

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 255-256.

to win an uncertain person to his support, his ways of courtship were uncouth..." and he only managed to make friends because of his "weight of character, ability, public spirit, and integrity..." However, Bancroft explained because Adams, "hating intolerance in all its forms, an impassioned lover of civil liberty" was "borne on to utter his convictions fearlessly by an impulse which forbade his acting otherwise." Congress, especially in the six months leading up to independence, was an ideal place for Adams to be, for "in the fervor of his activity, his faults disappeared. His intellect and public spirit, all the noblest parts of his nature, were called into the fullest exercise, and strained to the uttermost of their healthful power."³²

Benson Lossing acknowledged and accepted both ends of the spectrum in 1873 when he described Adams as "an honest, impetuous, outspoken man; vain, egotistical, opinionated; a close observer of men and things, too frank for a successful partisan politician or diplomate [sic], and an unselfish patriot."³³

John Forney, also writing around 1873, dismissed personal attacks all together. The stories "of Alexander Hamilton's affair with Mrs. Reynolds, or Benjamin Franklin's disputes with his rivals, or the angry expressions of John Adams, or the allusions to Thomas Jefferson's private relations, or the bargain and sale by which Clay cast the vote of Kentucky in 1825, or the row in Andrew Jackson's Cabinet about Mrs. Eaton" were only remembered as "curious

³² George Bancroft, *History of the United States from the Discovery of the American Continent*. Vol. 8. (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1868), pp. 308-312. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/ABW3954.0008.001>>

³³ Benson J. Lossing, "Signers of the Declaration of Independence," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* Vol. 47, Issue 278 (July 1873): 259. Available from Making of America - Cornell University <<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=ABK4014-0047-36>>

novelties for the new generation that never heard of them.” Forney claimed the stories “do not hurt the great names connected with them, because each of these great names had “a record” to stand by.” Forney asserted “you do not help your case by abuse of your adversary. History takes little note of what Freneau said of Washington, or Binns of John Adams, or Duff Green of Jackson; but it preserves among its choicest treasures the tributes of these famous men to their contemporaries and rivals.”³⁴ Forney also compared Adams to Washington and Jefferson and concluded, “John Adams... was an entirely different character... he was so much of a student, scholar, and statesman that his career may have been called a rather secluded one.” Ultimately, Forney desired to see beyond the damaging stories and recognizes the historical figures’ humanity. “They were not neophytes, born of faction, but characters of deep mould and high mark... Anybody who cared to go into the business of raking up the cinders of dead accusations could find many bitter things...” But such efforts were wasted because “there is a vast difference between the editorial that boldly questions a measure - as I did every day of my life in *The Press* - and that which assails private character, which I never do. The one belongs to permanent, the other to transient, journalism.”³⁵

Charles Francis Adams produced the apex of the sophisticated critical analysis of Adams’ life in his 1874 reprint of *The Life of John Adams*. Although originally printed in 1856 as part of the *Works*, it fit in well with the attempts to

³⁴ John Wien Forney, *Anecdotes of Public Men*. Vol. II. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1873[-1881]), pp. 231-232. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/AAN8043.0002.001>>

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 414.

understand Adams in his entirety. Charles Francis Adams identified this as his reason for having the biography reprinted when he did.

It has seemed to me a part of my duty once more to place before the public, and this altogether by itself, the biographical sketch of John Adams heretofore connected with the full collection of his works. My reason for it is this. That sketch is believed to have been the first attempt made with authentic materials to treat with calmness and impartiality of many controverted [sic] questions, and especially a very interesting but feebly understood portion of the early and most critical years of the Federal government. So deeply had it been clouded by contemporary passions, and so carefully avoided by timid writers of the same and a later generation, that no faithful account of it is believed to exist in any other work purporting to be a history of those times.³⁶

Charles Francis Adams recognized that some traits in Adams others had seen as undesirable made him perfect for his chosen profession. Adams' "confidence in his own judgment... gave it a cast of stubbornness and inflexibility, perhaps necessary for the successful exercise of the duties of a lawyer, nor sometimes less necessary, through requiring more frequently the counterchecks of self-control, in the halls of legislation and at the courts of kings." Charles Francis Adams recognized that "a more imperturbable equanimity might have been better adapted to the controversies of this subsequent political life, to the cool and crafty profligacy of simulated friends and insidious rivals," however, "even the vehemence of virtuous indignation is sometimes useful in establishing the character and reputation of a young man rising to eminence at the bar without adventitious aid, and upon the solitary energy of his own faculties."³⁷

³⁶ Charles Francis Adams and John Quincy Adams, *The Life of John Adams*. Vol. 1. (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott and Co., 1874), p. x. Appears in introduction by Charles Francis Adams. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/ABP5067.0001.001>>

Charles Francis Adams also provided a closer analysis of Adams' personality via his writings, letters, diary and autobiography.³⁸

Charles Francis Adams made an effort to explain why Adams was a controversial historical character. For example, in congress in 1775, Adams "was looking, with a statesman's eye, over the vast field beyond, and mapping out the form which the new power was to assume in the distant future. In this he was running far in advance of the prevailing opinions around him," according to Charles Francis Adams. The opposition were people who held on to the hope of reconciliation, who "did their best to throw obstacles in the way of all action calculated to diminish the chances of it [reconciliation]," and so "it was impossible for Mr. Adams to escape controversy." Charles Francis Adams used as an example the incident when a letter Adams wrote in June 1775 that contained an unfavorable description of John Dickinson, a fellow congressman, was intercepted and printed to stir up opposition to the opinions Adams was promoting in congress and Adams personally. Dickinson would become a life-long enemy of Adams as a result.³⁹

When analyzing Adams' presidency, Charles Francis Adams openly acknowledged Adams' shortcomings and was not overzealous with praise. He was also not rabidly anti-Hamilton. Charles Francis Adams stated that Adams' presidency had been "buried under the burden accumulated by the passionate

³⁷ Charles Francis Adams and John Quincy Adams, *The Life of John Adams*. Vol. 1. (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott and Co., 1874), p. 42. Available from Making of America Books - University of Michigan <<http://name.umd.umich.edu/ABP5067.0001.001>>

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 43-47, 49-51, 62-63.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 247-252.

conflicts and the bitter calumnies that swarmed in it.” He was optimistic that “with the imperfect means at hand, directed by a disposition to analyze with calmness and to observe with fidelity, it [did] not seem impossible to present a sketch bearing something intrinsic evidence of its correctness.” Charles Francis Adams pledged that “nothing shall be set down in malice, nothing which is not believed to be fully supported by evidence open to the most rigid scrutiny.”⁴⁰

Charles Francis Adams took his analysis of Adams’ presidency in a different direction than previous writers by not focusing on the Alien and Sedition Acts. He was quick to point out that Adams was not the one who developed the Alien and Sedition Acts; they had originated with the Federalists in congress.⁴¹ “Yet... he had no such constitutional doubts as would justify his declining to affix his official signature to them, not any scruples about putting them in execution, in an emergency. On the other hand, he had no confidence in their value as effective measures, and very little inclination to attempt experiments.” Charles Francis Adams cited letters which proved that this was Adams’ state of mind, and it caused “dissatisfaction among those federalists who had favored their adoption.” Adams’ only involvement with the Acts was his signature, according to Charles Francis Adams.⁴² He also pointed out that one of the reasons Adams did not attend the inauguration of Thomas Jefferson in 1801 was because of the death of his son Charles. Adams was censured, according to Charles Francis

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 213.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 244.

⁴² Ibid., pp. 300-301.

Adams, for not attending “at the time, by those who knew nothing of the circumstances, and who saw in it only a pettish sally of mortified ambition.”⁴³

Charles Francis Adams saw the true failure of Adams’ presidency in the apparent betrayal of members of Adams’ cabinet, which weakened it to the point of collapse. He cited Adams for leaving Philadelphia (then the national capitol) in the summer of 1798 to go home as a mistake. Though Washington had often done the same, Adams’ authority while absent was not comparable to his predecessor’s, according to Charles Francis Adams, and it was while Adams was gone that trouble brewed. Adams should have confronted his cabinet, but as Charles Francis Adams stated, “too much trust in the honest of others was the source of the mistakes which did the most to injure his reputation in his lifetime.” Unfortunately for Adams, “it gave repeated opportunities for acts of treachery on the part of correspondents, to whom, in the confidence of friendship, he had written unguarded letters,” and Adams’ absence “presented to his confidential officers an irresistible temptation to wield, without stint, the power in their hands, for the express purpose of controlling his plans and defeating his policy.”⁴⁴ Charles Francis Adams was surprised Adams reacted to the contention with his cabinet the way he did. Adams might have, “perhaps with some loss of personal dignity, painfully succeeded in maintaining his authority” but he did not.⁴⁵

⁴³ Ibid., p. 354.

⁴⁴ Ibid., Vol. 2. (1871), pp. 287-288. <<http://name.umd.umich.edu/ABP5067.0002.001>>

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 292.

CONCLUSION

The present and the future are forever defined by the past. The continually evolving relationship between Americans and the nation's origins reveal much about the current values, ideals and sense of self. Although this thesis focuses on a select portion of the general population, writers who engaged the history were in a unique position to shape popular conceptions. On the front line so to speak, understanding how they used John Adams is an important section of cultural history.

Based upon the writings mentioned in this thesis, the process of turning memory into history for the earliest historians of the Revolution was less rough than expected. Their reliance on primary documents (for example, George Washington's correspondence) was to their credit. Some of them were even criticized for relying too heavily on the *Annual Register*, a British compiled chronology of a given year's events.

While not entirely surprising or new, conclusions that can be drawn from this research are informative. While the Adams who first appeared in history books was honest and dedicated, later writers engaged a more controversial and polarizing figure. Leading up to and after his death Adams acquired an iconic quality as an aged relic from the Revolution, but his political legacy was debated upon (sometimes fervently) by writers in the 1840's through the 1860's. In the tumult of the mid 1800's, Adams was a moral beacon (as history in general was) and a source of examples for people trying to justify their point of view. His opinion was often sought through his writings and trusted on a variety of events

and issues. He was used by both abolitionist and anti-abolitionist sentiments leading up to and during the Civil War. The last group of writers to engage Adams was more sophisticated in their analysis and accepted both the good and bad elements of Adams and effectively presented Adams' humanity in his life as a whole. That effort was stunted by the fact that the first biography, written primarily by Charles Francis Adams, did not appear as its own volume until 1874, nearly fifty years after Adams' death. While it was on a smaller scale than some of the other founders, Adams was still related to and used by writers. In the end, Adams comes off as a cult classic with a substantial minority of history-writers engaging his memory and looking to his opinions for guidance. To return to Michael Kammen comment quoted in the introduction, Adams had always filled a niche in the history of the Revolution, but often it was considered too small for many to take notice. As for his contributions being beyond "cavil," in some ways that point has not quite been reached yet.

To quote John Ferling, "like most humans, John Adams was a man of many personae."¹ It is difficult to effectively summarize, conceptualize and understand ninety years of a complicated, convoluted and involved life such as John Adams'. Surveying who Adams was and what he means to American history is more of a process, as this thesis demonstrates, with each generation building their own layer onto a still incomplete picture.

¹ John Ferling, *John Adams: A Life*. (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1992), p. 4.

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