

ENCOUNTERING JOHN ADAMS: BOSTON AND BRAINTREE



NATIONAL
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HUMANITIES

Landmarks

Below are brief descriptions of the landmarks we will visit and links their websites.

The Adams National Historical Park

The three houses in the Park serve as critical texts for understanding and appreciating John and Abigail Adams, and the relationship between them. Adams' father, also named John, was a farmer and shoemaker in Braintree but also deacon of the local congregational church. The John Adams Birthplace, where the future president was raised is small and spare. It is unpainted, indicating Deacon John's frugality. It is a window into Massachusetts colonial life and the particular role of the Adams family in it. Adjacent to the cramped family quarters, is a long lean-to which was added on to serve as a public room, a place for Deacon John to hold meetings of parishioners. The inventory that Deacon John compiled lists 26 chairs, seemingly a foolish extravagance for a man unwilling to paint his house. But the chairs were necessary to enable the church congregants to meet and deliberate. Young John sat in that very lean-to and listened to the parishioners debate whether the minister was sufficiently orthodox. Later, when he had to decide whether to pursue the ministry or the law, Adams harked back to that effort to censor the minister as a key factor in causing him to choose the law in preference to the ministry.

The John Quincy Adams Birthplace, in which John raised his own family, is almost as humble as the John Adams birthplace but, in keeping with the young lawyer's increasing affluence, the exterior is painted. The house is a text both for understanding how information was transmitted during the Revolution, and the sufferings and sacrifices the Adams family endured in the Revolutionary cause. Then as now, it sits right beside the road, a virtue in the days before mass media when travelers were the best source of news. While serving in the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, John obtained his best information about the impact of the war on New England from Abigail's letters filled with news she picked up from roadside travelers (see reading list).

The participants will visit the tiny attic in which Abigail sheltered refugees and militiamen. They will view remnants of the china she asked John to buy in the Netherlands for her to sell to earn income for their cash poor household. Together, these two house provide the concrete embodiment of the charge that Adams gave to Abigail to take part in the revolutionary struggle, raise and educate the children,

farm the land and keep the household intact so that he could serve his country in faraway places. In the Old House participants will also see the mold into which Abigail poured the family pewter cutlery to make musket balls.

John Adams law office is in the Quincy Adams Birthplace. It contains his stand up desk and his law books. It is also the room where he drafted the Massachusetts Constitution. It enables the participants to gain insight into the practice of law in the 18th Century and the sorts of references that lawyers made use of in forming their legal arguments. By examining copies of the briefs he filed the participants can follow his progression from the novice who lost his first case to the learned and sophisticated advocate who successfully defended a British officer in the Boston Massacre case.

In 1788 the Adams' moved into what came to be called the Old House, a few miles away from the birthplaces. Comparing the size, scale and appointments of this dwelling to the earlier ones illustrates crucial differences between Adams' life in the new republic as opposed to his life in colonial times. The Old House originally had seven ample size rooms and rooms for servants, indicating that by this time the Adams' had a staff of servants. Whereas the birthplaces has crude American made furnishings the Old House has many items garnered during Adams' travels abroad including a Louis XVI settee and chairs, a Bombay chest, and a four poster bed from the Netherlands. And yet evidence also abounds of Adams' frugality and of the relative governmental simplicity of those times. The original copy of the Paris Peace Treaty is embossed with the Boyleston family seal because Adams was unwilling to incur the expense of creating a family seal of his own. Adams' study served as the summer White House. His desk has less than ten pigeon holes and yet that was sufficient to enable him to reserve one entire pigeon hole for each of the departments of government.

Massachusetts Historical Society (MHS)

The MHS houses the Adams Family Papers 250,000 documents which include John and Abigail's correspondence, letter books, diaries, literary manuscripts, speeches, legal and business papers. James Taylor, Editor in Chief of the Adams Papers, will introduce the participants to the collection and also share the knowledge he has garnered about Adams from his long and painstaking work in editing the papers. He will also describe how and why original manuscripts serve a whole panoply of scholarly and pedagogical purposes. Crossed out words, changed words and other additions and deletions, which only the originals retain, offer insight into the emotional state and thought pattern of the author. Poring over these originals enables one to imagine how the author agonized over certain word and sentence choices and how the writer refined and altered the meanings and emotions she or he was seeking to convey. For example, Abigail's letters to Mercy Otis Warren are heavily rewritten in an effort to replace colloquial expressions with more erudite ones(see reading list). Warren, the wife of revolutionary leader Charles Warren, would later write a very important and influential history of the Revolution. She was one of the most learned and sophisticated women of her day. By contrast, Abigail's letters to other female friends bear the marks of being written with far

fewer editorial changes and include earthier forms of expression. The original grammar, capitalization and punctuation of these manuscripts reveal further differences in points of emphasis and other subtle shadings of thought and meaning. The archaic spelling provides important clues about how words were pronounced in the 18th Century. For example, Abigail Adams wrote the word New York as one word, Newyork. Most likely it was pronounced almost like Newark.

The Massachusetts Archives

In the early years of the American Revolution, Adams was simultaneously a member of the Continental Congress and of the Council of the new state of Massachusetts, which functioned both as the executive (there was no governor) and the upper house of the legislature. When in Boston, Adams attended Council meetings. The Council records as well as other documents related to its operations are housed at the Massachusetts State Archives. Participants can gain new insight into the mundane problems facing Revolutionary Massachusetts, and Adams' role in addressing those problems by reading the committee reports he signed and the various documents he drafted. His cost of living and style of life in Philadelphia is revealed by the raft of receipts listing his tavern bills, food costs, oats for his horse and clothing bills that he submitted to the Council for reimbursement.

The Archives also house the original copy of the Massachusetts Constitution as well as many documents relating to the drafting process and the subsequent ratification. Participants can observe the various modifications that were made in the language and substance of Adams' original draft. By comparing Adams' original draft to the amended drafts the participants can gain new insight into the political process that resulted in the removal of Adams strong endorsement of religious freedom (see reading list).

When the draft was approved by the legislature, it was sent out to all the towns of Massachusetts for their approval. The Archives has the reports written by the various town meetings detailing their specific objections to the document and their reasons for either approving or rejecting different parts of it. In some cases these reports appear as marginal comments written on the draft constitution itself. These reports provide a unique guide to what citizens from all parts of the state thought about the various key provisions. It is a very valuable window into the state of public opinion at the time.

The Boston Public Library

The John Adams Library contains his personal library of more than 3000 books. Studying the voluminous notes he wrote in the book margins and the changes in the kind of books he bought provides important insights into the development of Adams' thought. Adams zealously collected books during his whole life but the records of his book purchases indicate a decisive shift from his early years, when he concentrated on law books to his later years when his interests shifted to European history and philosophy. 500 of the books contain annotations made by Adams. In some critical instances the annotations are very extensive and very

revealing of Adams' thoughts. He first read Mary Wollstonecraft's History of the French Revolution in 1796 and he wrote very extensive marginal notes(see appendix for a facsimile extract). Adams believed that republican government had to have several different parts, each one operating to check the other. He berates Wollstoncraft for praising the revolutionary government's simplicity. "a wagon would be more simple if it had one wheel... a woman if she had one breast". He reread this book in 1810, after Napoleon's rise to power and his later notes stress the dangers of demagoguery. The participants will be introduced to the library by its staff and will spend the better part of a morning and afternoon studying text and annotation excerpts.