

ENCOUNTERING JOHN ADAMS: BOSTON AND BRAINTREE



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE
HUMANITIES

Readings

Participants will read several of Adams' most important essays and letters including. These readings will be emailed to participants as PDF files, and they are easily discovered online. Most of these readings, and others, can be found in C. Bradley Thompson, ed., *The Revolutionary Writings of John Adams* (Liberty Fund, 2000).

A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law. In this, one of his earliest essays, Adams speculates on the deeper meanings of such British policies as the Stamp Act: namely, the apparent intention to impose the "canon and feudal law", which has long oppressed the English, on the colonies. In the process, he offers the "common sense" understanding of government of his own Puritan ancestors as a source of guidance for colonial republicans. Participants will also read the *Instructions of the Town of Braintree to their Representative* that Adams drafted and which was passed by the Braintree town meeting. Its purpose was to guide the Braintree member of the Massachusetts General Court on the appropriate legislative response to the Stamp Act Crisis.

Novanglus; or, A History of the Dispute with America From its Origin in 1754 to the Present Time. Written in the fall of 1774, this essay delves into English and colonial legal history in order to demonstrate that American provincial legislatures are sovereign over their internal affairs. *Novanglus* takes Adams to the edge of the precipice, denying the authority of the British Parliament over life in the colonies while still acknowledging an allegiance to the King.

Thoughts on Government served as a blueprint for the North Carolina, Virginia, New Jersey and New York constitutions as well as that of Massachusetts. Among the most important principles it advocated were a bicameral legislature, an independent judiciary, and a strong executive.

Excerpts from the *Correspondence of John and Abigail Adams.* Letters between John and Abigail often touch on political questions, and we will make a selection of these letters, which participants will have an opportunity to study in their original form at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

A Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America (excerpts). This work was published just in time to have had some impact on the Constitutional Convention, and it was widely known by the delegates. It

reinforced the importance of such principles as checks and balances, an independent judiciary, and bicameralism -- principles that Adams had been defending for many years.

The Massachusetts Constitution of 1780. Drafted by Adams, this Constitution (still in force in Massachusetts, though substantially altered by amendments) is the first constitution to have been submitted for ratification to a popularly chosen convention – another way in which it served as a model for the Constitutional Convention seven years later.

Excerpts from *The Correspondence of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson*. In retirement, Adams re-established his friendship with Jefferson and the two engaged in one of the most justly famous correspondences in the history of American letters. The participants will read a representative selection from that correspondence sufficient to indicate the breadth of topics broached and the depth of insight achieved.

Recommended reading:

Prior to attending the Workshop, we strongly recommend that participants read David McCullough's biography, *John Adams* (Simon & Schuster, 2001).

Other works that will prove helpful are:

C. Bradley Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty* (University Press of Kansas, 1998).

Ralph Lerner, *The Thinking Revolutionary* (Cornell University Press, 1987), "Prologue: Recovering the Revolution," pp. 1-40.

John Ferling, *Adams vs Jefferson: The Tumultuous Election of 1800* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

Joseph J. Ellis, *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (Vintage Books, 2000).