

ENCOUNTERING JOHN ADAMS: BOSTON AND BRAINTREE



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE
HUMANITIES

Workshops

The workshop is divided into four units each covering a crucial stage of Adams' public life:

1. as a lawyer and political activist in Colonial Massachusetts;
2. as a leader of the American Revolution;
3. as a drafter of the Massachusetts Constitution;
4. as an author and correspondent during his post-presidential years.

Lectures and seminars by, and conferences with, historians and political scientists will supplement and amplify the hands-on learning provided by the landmarks. The seminars will be led by the Project Directors, Dennis Hale and Marc Landy of the Boston College Political Science Department. Hale teaches American Political Thought and the American Founding, and Landy teaches American Political Development and the Presidency. Both directors teach undergraduates as well as graduate students. The seminars will provide a thread of analytic continuity and will seek to integrate the specific lessons learned at the landmarks. They will also enable participants to link the body of Adams' work and ideas to the specific projects they will be working on. And, of course, the seminars will offer a chance for participants to learn from the questions and comments of one another.

The following is an overview of each seminar and the readings that accompany it.

Seminar One - John Adams and Colonial America

This seminar concentrates on Adams early efforts to think through the meaning of free government and the central purposes of good government within the context of British rule and de facto self-government in the colonies stretching back to the earliest charters and settlements. What did Adams borrow from the great British and continental thinkers and what criticisms did he have regarding the state of political affairs in Britain, on the continent, and in the colonies? How did his own participation in the political life of Massachusetts and his relations with leaders in other colonies reflect these understandings? What lessons did he learn from his Puritan ancestors, and what was his understanding of Christianity and its role in republican government?

Participants will read Adams' first major political essay, *A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law* in which he first identified the unique virtues of the forms

of government found in New England. He then identified the greatest danger to these governments: the evident designs of Britain, as displayed by the Stamp Act. The Stamp Act, Adams argued, violates the most fundamental principle of the English Constitution, as expressed in the Magna Charta, that citizens shall be not be deprived of their property nor be taxed without their consent. 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 proper legislative response to the Stamp Act Crisis. Both these documents combine a critique of British policy towards the colonies with expressions of veneration for the English constitutional order and for the king in particular.

Seminar Two - Adams as Revolutionary

Seminar Two poses the most mystifying question. Why did Adams take the decisive step in favor of revolution and how does his decision help us to understand the character of the American Revolution and the motivations of its leaders? Adams' friends and enemies all agreed that he was no firebrand. He was a lawyer who wrote of the paramount importance of the rule of law – even to the point of defending British soldiers against murder charges after the Boston Massacre. As a lawyer and farmer he could not expect to reap the windfall that merchants might hope to gain if they were freed from British control of trade. Nor was he a military man yearning for glory on the battlefield. It is fair to say that the prospects for reform under the British King were no dimmer than the prospects of winning a war against the world's greatest military power. And yet this temperate and moderate individual not only joined the revolutionary cause; he became one of its most important and militant leaders. He is generally conceded to have been the most forceful and influential voice in convincing the Continental Congress to declare independence, against the wishes of many of its most influential members.

This unit will examine the transformation of Adams from reformer to revolutionary. It will pay particularly close attention to his organizing activities in Massachusetts and his role as one of his state's representative to the Continental Congress. Participants will read *Novanglus; or, A History of the Dispute with America From its Origin in 1754 to the Present Time*. Written in the fall of 1774, it delved into English and colonial legal history in order to demonstrate that American provincial legislatures are sovereign over their internal affairs. In other words, *Novanglus* took Adams to the edge of a precipice, denying the authority of the British Parliament over life in the colonies while still acknowledging an allegiance to the King.

During the deliberations of the Continental Congress Adams came to the decision to go the extra step and advocate an armed struggle for independence. Unfortunately, no text survives of the speech he made in favor of adopting the Declaration of Independence, so the workshop will make do with a selection of letters he wrote in the weeks before the speech expressing his ambivalence about breaking with Britain and his commitment to doing so. Part of the seminar discussion will serve as an introduction to Boston's Freedom Trail, the self-guided walk through Boston's North End that encompasses several of Boston's most

important Revolutionary War sites including: Faneuil Hall and the Old South Meeting House where Adams attended and spoke at revolutionary gatherings, Old North Church, and Paul Revere's house.

Seminar Three - John Adams, Constitutionalist

Although John Adams was still serving in Britain and was therefore absent from the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, he still ranks as among the most important sources of its inspiration. Even in the early stages of the war, Adams was already moving beyond a defense of the rebellion to devising a plan for postwar governance of a democratic republic. In May of 1776 the Continental Congress passed a resolution, strongly championed by Adams, calling on the individual colonies to frame their own constitutions. Even before its adoption, delegates from various states were seeking Adams' advice about how best to formulate and structure such a document. Adams responded with an essay in which he laid out specific principles regarding both the ends to be achieved by constitutional government and the specific means to be included in a constitutional design. His *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. In 1787 Adams elaborated the ideas in *Thoughts* in a much longer and more scholarly work, *A Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*. It was widely known among those who took part in the Philadelphia Convention and it reinforced the great influence that his specific constitutional principles – checks and balances, an independent judiciary, bicameralism – had already had upon such important convention delegates as Madison and Rush. Participants will read the *Thoughts* as well as key portions of the *Massachusetts Constitution* drafted by Adams in 1780, just before his voyage to England to take up new duties as the American ambassador.

Seminar Four - The Legacy of John Adams

Adams spent the years between 1789 and 1800 in service to the national government, as Vice President for two terms, and then as President for one tumultuous term, during which the American party system was born, the nation came to the brink of war with both England and France, and Adams' friendship with Jefferson suffered a blow from which it almost did not recover. We will spend some time on the most contentious of these events: The Alien and Sedition Acts, which Adams supported as President.

We will then turn to the years that Adams spent in Braintree, in retirement, for the last 26 years of his life. The Adams National Historic Park is richly evocative of the time and effort he put into improving his house and lands at the estate he named "Peacedale". Both the richness and the plainness of his house reflect his character and his philosophical outlook. In those years Adams had the leisure to read voluminously and write extensively. He also 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. Based on these materials as well as a review of his earlier writings and activities, the final seminar will examine Adams' intellectual and political legacy in an effort to come to grips with the full import and impact of his words and deeds.