Atlas of Independence

John Adams and the American Revolution

by Chris Mackowski

Robert Orrison, series editor

Unedited Excerpt

First edition, first printing

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025045568

ISBN: 978-1-61121-781-0 (paperback)
ISBN: 978-1-61121-782-7 (ebook)

Savas Beatie LLC
989 Governor Drive, Suite 101
El Dorado Hills, California 95762
916-941-6896 / sales@savasbeatie.com / www.savasbeatie.com

All Savas Beatie titles are available for bulk purchase discounts. Contact us for details.
Proudly published, printed, and warehoused in the United States of America.

Table of Contents

Footnotes for this volume are available at https://emergingcivilwar.com/publication/footnotes/

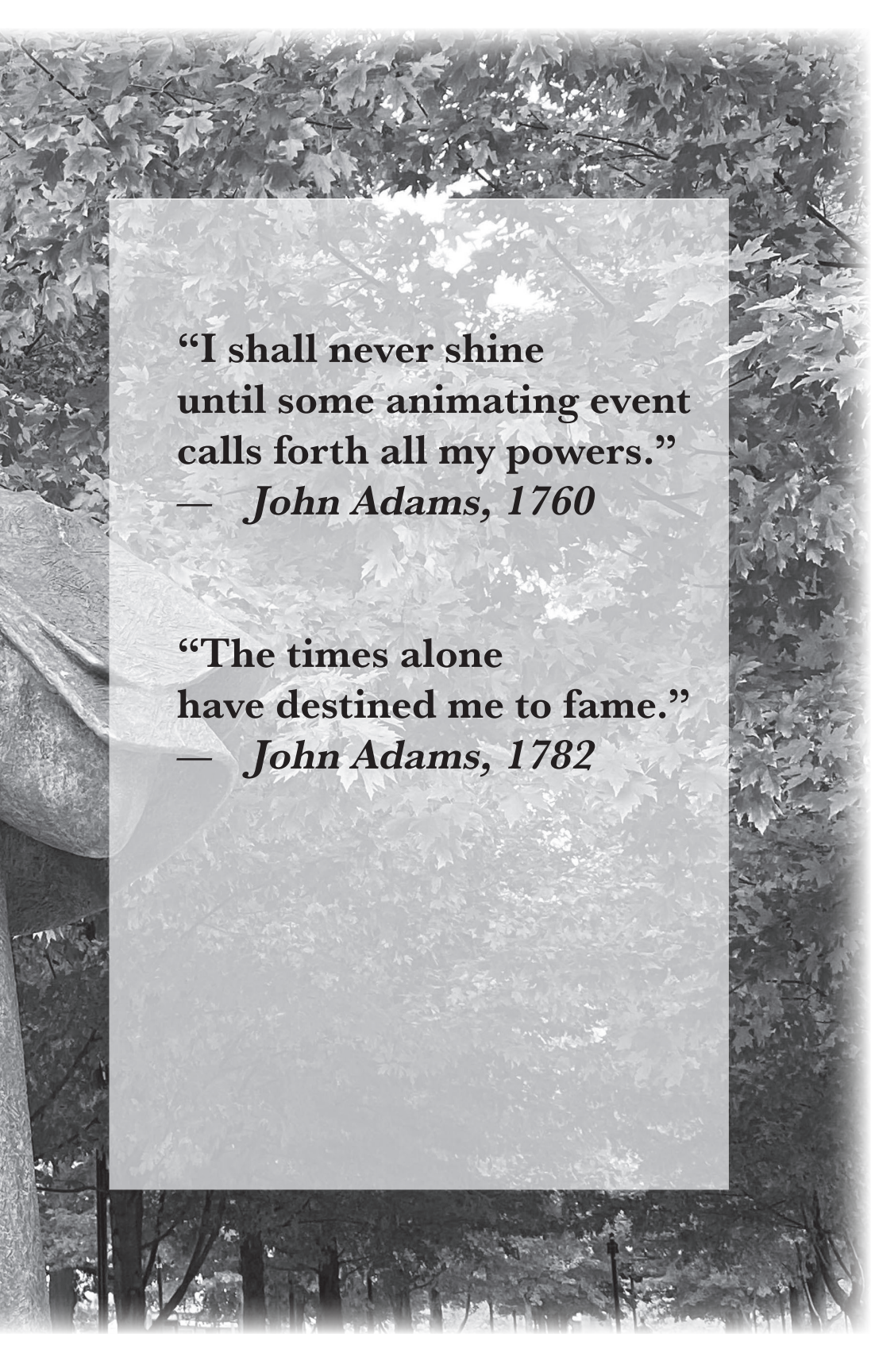
PHOTO CREDITS: *Cassell's Illustrated History of England*, Vol. 5 (cihe); Phill Greenwalt (pg); Library of Congress (loc); Bill Coughlin/Historical Marker Database (bc/hmdb); Boston Public Library (bpl); Chris Mackowski (cm); Chris Mackowski/author's collection (cm/ac); National Archives and Records Administration/Robert Knudsen. White House Photographs. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston (nara/rk); National Park Service (nps); National Portrait Gallery (npg); New York Public Library Digital Collections (nypl); National Security Agency (nsa); Brian Swartz (bs); SSwonk/Wikipedia commons (ss/w); White House Collection/White House Historical Association (whha); Wikipedia (w)

For the Emerging Revolutionary War Series

Theodore P. Savas, *publisher*
Sarah Keeney, *editorial consultant*
Veronica Kane, *production supervisor*
Pat McCormick, *copyeditor*
Ryan Quint, *proofreader*

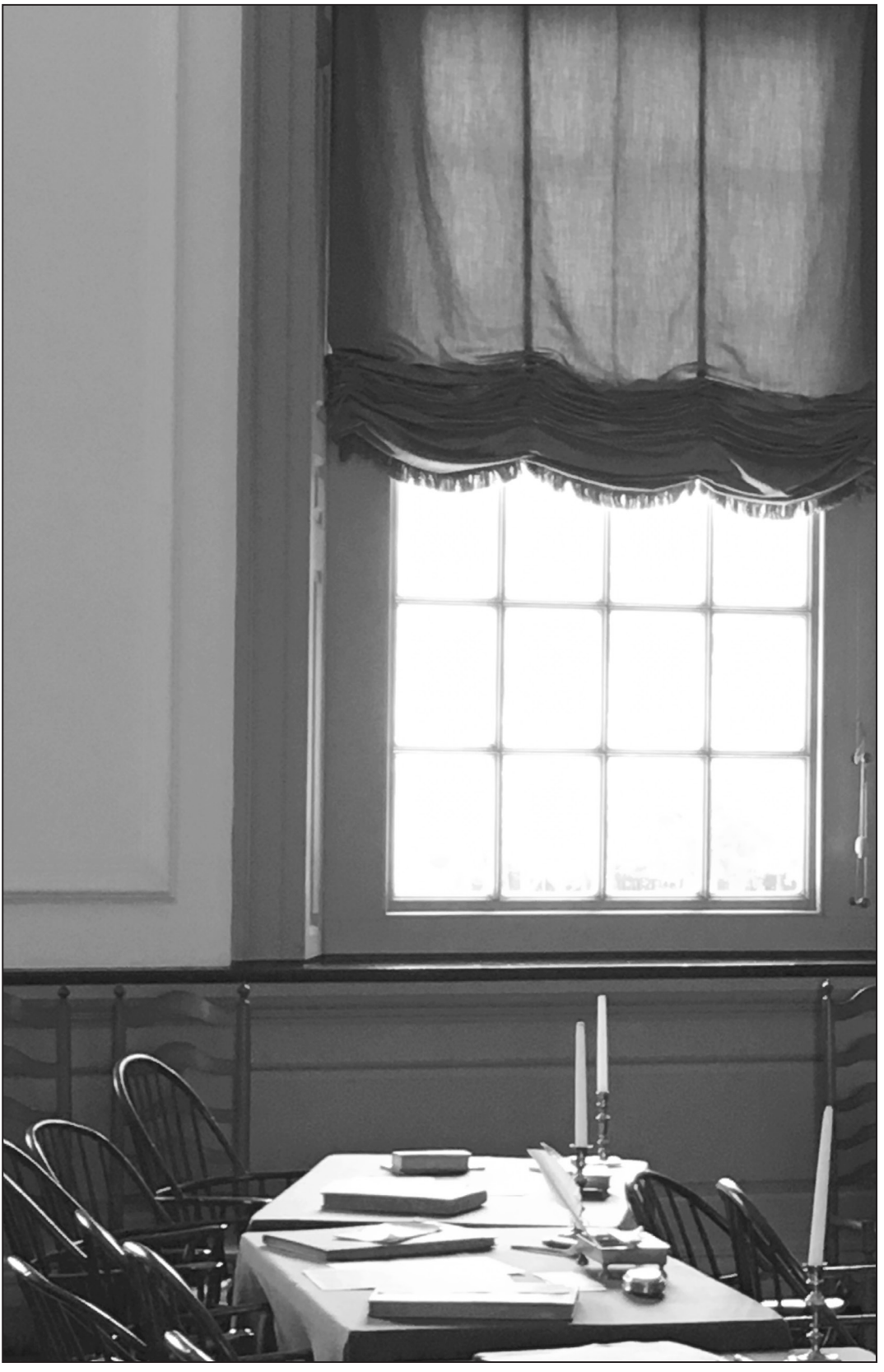
Robert Orrison, *chief historian and co-founder*
Phillip S. Greenwalt, *co-founder*
Chris Mackowski, *advisory editor*

Layout by Chris Mackowski



**"I shall never shine
until some animating event
calls forth all my powers."**
— *John Adams, 1760*

**"The times alone
have destined me to fame."**
— *John Adams, 1782*



The Most Bitter, Malicious, Determined and Implacable Enemy

Adams vs. Sewall

CHAPTER ONE

Summer 1774

The hilltop view from Falmouth's east-end, 172 feet high, offered a spectacular view of Casco Bay to the east. The morning sun hovered over a seascape dotted with fishing boats and high-masted commerce ships that weaved around and through a small coastal archipelago—the daily in-and-out of Falmouth's busy harbor. John Adams might have been in Maine attending to his legal duties on the circuit court, but the view from Munjoy Hill would have very much reminded him of the seaside scene of his own home in Braintree, Massachusetts.

At 40 years old, standing 5-foot-5 or 6, Adams tended toward portly, but he was a man used to physical exercise. Aside from his law practice, he worked around his farm, chopping wood, harvesting wheat, and spreading manure. Early walks were a staple of his daily routine, sometimes covering five or six miles. "The Charms of the Morning at this Hour, are irresistible," he would once tell his wife, Abigail. "The Streakes of Glory dawning in the East:

The Cleeve-Tucker Memorial along the East Promenade of Portland Neck honors Portland's founders, George Cleeve and Richard Tucker. Each side features one of the names Portland has been known by: Falmouth, Machigonne, Casco, and Portland. It's the first-ever monument erected in the city, July 4, 1883. (cm)

the freshness and Purity in the Air, the bright blue of the sky, the sweet Warblings of a great Variety of Birds intermingling with the martial Clarions of an hundred Cocks now within my Hearing, all conspire to chear the Spirits." His writing sparkled best when he evoked such pastoral scenes.

On this particular July morning, Adams was accompanied by an old friend, Jonathan Sewall, the attorney general of Massachusetts, who was also working the legal circuit. Sewall had suggested the early morning walk, and together they had wound through the streets of downtown and out across the cow pastures around the hill. Even in mid-summer, the Maine morning was cool, but the conversation between the two companions may have grown even cooler. Weeks earlier, Adams had been selected as one of four delegates to a proposed "Continental Congress" in far-off Philadelphia where representatives from the various colonies could discuss shared grievances with Great Britain. Sewall did not want Adams to go.

The two men had known each other for more than fifteen years, since 1758, when Adams first began practicing law in Boston. Sewall, a 1748 graduate of Harvard, was six years Adams's senior, but the two fell into company with each other as part of a small circle of promising young attorneys trying to find their footing in New England's largest and most important city. They grew so close, Sewall addressed Adams as "Brother."

Sewall had grown up in tight circumstances. His father was an unsuccessful merchant who had died young, and only a fund-raising campaign conducted by the family pastor and political strings pulled by his uncle—who was chief justice of the colonial court—enabled Sewell's Harvard attendance. After a brief foray into teaching, Sewell took a law apprenticeship with an attorney in Charlestown, on Boston's north side. The attorney eventually gifted his practice to his hard-working young apprentice.

Adams had no such patronage. "[I]t is my Destiny to dig Treasures with my own fingers," he once—correctly—predicted. "No Body will lend me or sell me a Pick axe." He scraped and scrabbled to build his practice. He lost his first case on a technicality of his own fault, and the embarrassment of it drove him to

Artist Benjamin Blyth created this pastel portrait of John Adams circa 1766. It is the earliest-known image of Adams, created just after his marriage to Abigail. Blyth also created a companion portrait of her (see page 38). (nypl)

sweat the details on subsequent cases. "It will be said, I don't understand my Business," he worried. "No one will trust his Interest in my hands."

He likewise constantly worried about having finances enough to marry and start a family. The law, he knew, would allow him to achieve such dreams, although he dreaded the long process of paying his dues—he wanted to just get on with it and jump to the part where he was successful. In his diary, he described himself as "aspiring and ambitious," but he also felt his "own Ignorance" and a "concern for Knowledge, and fame." He wrestled with his aspirations and insecurities. "I have a dread of Contempt, a quick sense of Neglect, a strong Desire of Distinction," he admitted.

But Adams practiced law for the right reasons, too, not just because it provided opportunity for advancement. He saw the law as something noble and empowering. In a 1759 letter to Sewall, Adams described his profession in terms that would prophesize his lifelong approach to public service:

> Now to what higher object, to what greater character, can any mortal aspire than to be

> possessed of all this knowledge, well digested and ready at command, to assist the feeble and friendless, to discountenance the haughty and lawless, to procure redress to wrongs, the advancement of right, to assert and maintain liberty and virtue, to discourage and abolish tyranny and vice?

For Adams, the law offered inspiration and aspiration even as it exposed him to fools, knaves, and lunatics—as he once described his docket of clients. "There is every Year, some new and astonishing scene of Vice, laid open to the Consideration of the Public," he marveled in 1760.

Adams threw himself into his practice with manic hard work. "[B]end your whole soul to the Institutes of the Law . . ." he told himself. He vowed to "Let no trifling Diversion or amuzement or Company decoy you from your Books, i.e. let no Girl, no Gun, no Cards, no flutes, no Violins, no Dress, no Tobacco, no Laziness, decoy you from your Books."

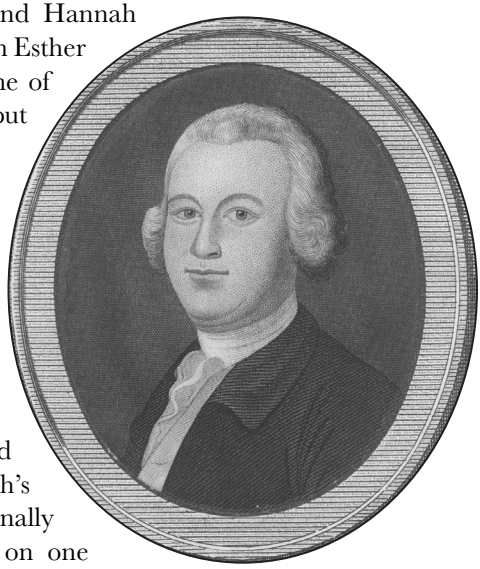
Easier said than done. Although he did not know it at the time, Adams would spend a lifetime trying to quell a tumultuous mind. "I cant command my attention," he lamented in the spring of 1759. "My Thoughts are roving from Girls to friends, from friends to Court, to Worcester, to Piscataquay, Newbury, and then to Greece and Rome, then to France, from Poetry to oratory, and Law, and Oh, a rambling, Imagination. . . . I have to smooth and harmonise my Mind, teach every Thought within its Bounds, to roll, and keep the equal Measure of the Soul."

Forefront were girls and friends. Adams had been advised by Jeremiah Gridley, one of the "old lions" of the Boston legal scene, not to marry too early lest it impoverish him prematurely. Intellectually, Adams recognized the advice as sage, yet he could not help but engage in the pursuit. "I was of an amorous disposition and very early from ten or eleven Years of Age, was very fond of the Society of females," he later explained in his autobiography. "I had my favorites among the young Women and spent many of my Evenings in their Company and this disposition, although controlled for seven Years after my Entrance into College, returned and engaged me too much till I was married."

Sewall was a principal partner in these pursuits. The two friends spent many evenings together courting a pair of cousins, Esther and Hannah Quincy. Sewall focused his attentions on Esther while Adams focused on Hannah—one of several suitors vying for her attention, but apparently her favorite.

"If I look upon a law book my eyes, it is true, are on the book, but imagination is at a tea table, seeing that hair, those eyes, that shape, that familiar friendly look," Adams pined.

Although moon-eyed, he seemed in no rush to propose. Perhaps he struggled with Gridley's advice not to marry too soon. Perhaps he sensed something not quite sincere in Hannah's intentions. Whatever the case, he finally made peace with his concerns, and on one spring evening in 1759, he resolved to ask her hand in marriage. He managed to pull her aside for private conversation—and in burst Sewall and Esther, wrecking the moment and foiling the mood.



Attorney and mentor James Otis, Jr. remained a hero to Adams for Adams's entire life, and Adams credited him with sparking the Independence movement in Boston through his fiery orations in court. "[A]s if he had been inspired with a spirit of Prophecy, [he] laid open to the view of a crouded Audience all that has since happened in America. Here the Revolution commensed," Adams said. (nypl)

Adams never again took the opportunity to propose, perhaps because all those same concerns continued jostling in his tumultuous mind. In any event, within a year, Hannah accepted a proposal from another of Adams's friends, which Adams only found out about second hand. With nonchalance that barely concealed his bitterness, he tried to dismiss the whole episode, crediting Sewall with interrupting "a Conversation that would have terminated in a Courtship, which would in spight of the Dr. have terminated in a Marriage, which Marriage might have depressed me to absolute Poverty and obscurity, to the End of my Life. But the Accident seperated us . . . which have delivered me from very dangerous shackles, and left me at Liberty, if I will but mind my studies, of making a Character and a fortune."

Another two years would pass before Adams allowed himself to get serious enough with a woman, Abigail Smith, to again contemplate marriage. Even then, Gridley's advice about delaying weighed on him. But Adams, infatuated as he was, couldn't hold out any longer, and on October 25, 1764, he and Abigail

wed. It would prove to be the most fortuitous act of John Adams's life and a partnership vital for the American Founding.

* * *

Sewall, meanwhile, went on to marry Esther Quincy. His professional arc, too, continued its rise, and in 1767, he became the colonial attorney general. His new position calcified his pro-British sympathies, and he became a strong proponent of the Crown during the political tumult of the late 60s that resulted from the Stamp Act and subsequent Townsend Acts.

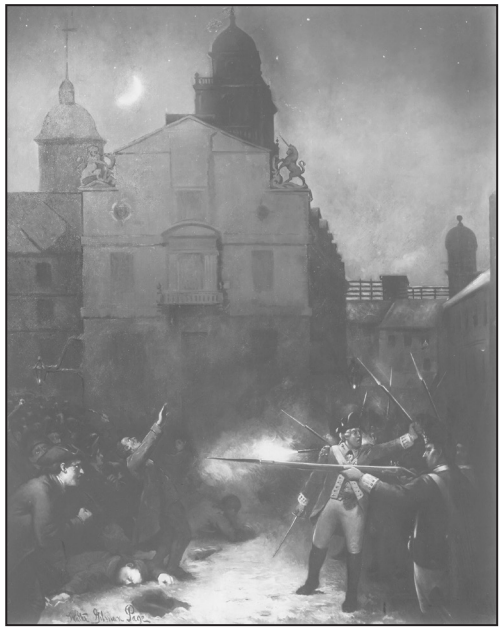
Adams's sympathies, however, had begun to lean in the other direction. Later in life, he would point back to a case in 1761 when one of his legal mentors, James Otis, Jr., whose "popularity was without bounds," attacked the constitutionality of writs of assistance, which essentially amounted to a direct attack on British authority. "Otis was a flame of fire!" Adams recalled. "[In] a rapid torrent of impetuous Eloquence he hurried away all before him." It was, Adams said, "the first Act of opposition to the Arbitrary claims of Great Britain. Then and there the Child Independence was born."

Otis's style—crammed with "a depth of research" that put classical allusions, historical references, and a wide array of legal and scholarly sources at his fingertips—profoundly impacted Adams, who vowed to approach public speaking with the same intellectual firepower and emotional appeal. He would succeed in such spectacular fashion that it would change the course of American history.

The other most important episode in Adams's legal career came nearly a decade after Otis had so deeply moved him, sparked by events in front of the Boston Custom House on March 5, 1770. An agitated mob began harassing a lone British sentry, who was reinforced by seven of his comrades and an officer. The mob grew in size and agitation. Snowballs flew, then iceballs and bricks. A gun went off. British soldiers opened fire. Five civilians lay dead on the snowy cobblestone street.

The British called it "the incident on King Street," but the anti-British Sons of Liberty called

it "the Boston Massacre," and their name stuck—in infamy and in history. The soldiers were brought up on charges, but at first, no Boston lawyer would represent them, either because they were anti-British themselves or out of fear of reprisals by the same anti-British mobs that had threatened the soldiers. Adams, believing all men should have the right to a fair trial, took the case, although somewhat reluctantly. His fears eased a bit when the Sons of Liberty—headed by Adams's second cousin, Samuel—tacitly indicated their approval.



The Boston Massacre became one of the most infamous events in American history, but the emotionally charged incident was pregnant with nuance. (loc)

Sam Adams had particular contempt for "the dangerous, ruinous and fatal effects of standing armies in populous cities in time of peace," John wrote, but Sam also knew the only way Massachusetts could hold the high moral ground in the eyes of the world was to demonstrate that it remained a colony ruled by law, not mobs.

"[I]t's of more importance . . . that innocence should be protected, than it is, that guilt should be punished . . ." Adams told the jury when the trial finally got underway. With Otis-like eloquence, passion, strength of reasoning, and facts, Adams laid out his case. "Facts are stubborn things," Adams concluded; "and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passions, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence. . . . [I]f an assault was made to endanger their lives, the law is clear, they had a right to kill in their own defence. . . ."

Juries agreed with Adams, first acquitting the officer, Capt. Thomas Preston, in an October trial, then acquitting six of the soldiers in a follow-up trial in November. The other two soldiers, convicted of manslaughter, were branded on their thumbs. All the soldiers involved were soon bustled back to England to avoid further troubles.

Adams was lauded for his work, earning plaudits for the integrity with which he handled the case. His law practice flourished. He later admitted the

entire episode "procured me Anxiety, and Obloquy enough," but he called it "one of the best Pieces of Service I ever rendered my Country."

* * *

The two friends, Adams and Sewall, did not travel their divergent paths in isolation from one another. Their legal careers and the day's political upheavals brought them into intersection often. One of their most notable interactions came through the newspapers in 1763. Sewall wrote a series of essays defending the colonial administration and satirizing Adams's hero, Otis. Adams responded under a pseudonym he'd invented years earlier, Humphrey Ploughjogger, a plain-spoken laborer who, in this latest incarnation, suddenly became quite sophisticated in his thinking.

Another key intersection came in 1768 when the British navy illegally seized a ship, the *Liberty*, owned by Boston merchant John Hancock. A search allegedly found illegal cargo. The episode eventually triggered a riot along the waterfront. Sewall prosecuted the case while Hancock hired Adams as his defense lawyer. After five months, Sewall dropped the charges.

Sometime during this period, Sewall called on Adams with a dinner invitation. "[A]lthough We were at Antipodes in Politicks," Adams later said, "We had never abated in mutual Esteem or cooled in the Warmth of our Friendship."

They enjoyed a pleasant evening of food and conversation, but after the meal, Sewall revealed the true nature of his visit: the colonial governor had asked Sewall to offer Adams the influential position of advocate general on the Court of Admiralty.

"The Office was lucrative in itself, and a sure introduction to the most profitable Business in the Province," Adams later wrote. Yet his answer to Sewall "was very prompt. . . ."

I am sensible of the honor done me by the Governor, Adams told his friend, *but must be excused from accepting his offer. . . . I could not in honor or conscience accept it.*

Why? Sewall asked.

I could not place myself in a situation in which my duty and my inclination would be so much at variance, Adams explained. He pointed out his political differences

A private residence today, Jonathan Sewall's house was built in 1760 by Richard Lechmere, who sold the house to Sewall in the early 1770s to cover his debts. On September 1, 1774, an anti-Crown mob targeted the house and forced Sewall and his family into Boston under the protection of the British army. Sewall later abandoned the house when he left Massachusetts for England. Following the surrender of the British army at Saratoga in October 1777, prisoners were sent to Cambridge; patriot leaders seized Sewall's house for use as a prison for Hessian General Baron Friedrich Adolf Riedesel and his wife, Charlotte. Now referred to as the Lechmere-Sewall-Riedesel House, it sits at 149 Brattle Street in Cambridge. (cm)

with not only Sewall but with the governor and the Crown itself.

I hope you will reconsider, Sewall said. *Perhaps if I come back in a few weeks and you've had time to think on it.*

"[M]y mind was clear and my determination decided and unalterable," Adams concluded.

As time passed, "boxes of politics, as opposite as East and West" separated them, Adams said regretfully. By 1772, the friendship had fully curdled. "Eleven Years ago I thought him the best Friend I had in the World. I loved him accordingly . . ." Adams wrote in November that year. "At this Moment I look upon him [as] the most bitter, malicious, determined and implacable Enemy I have. God forgive him the Part he has acted, both in public and private Life!"

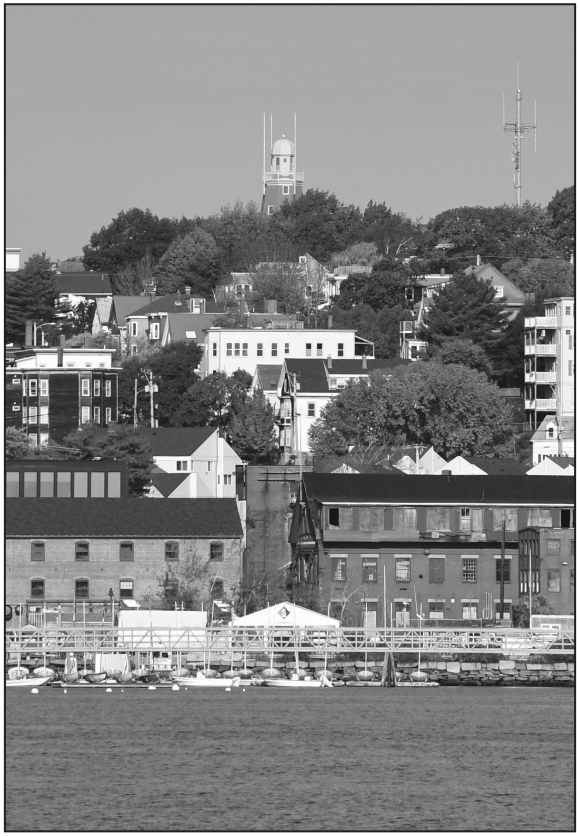
He ended his note, though, with an important, insightful concession: "It is not impossible that he may make the same Prayer for me."

* * *

And so it was that on a July morning in 1774, the two men found themselves together again, standing atop a hill overlooking Casco Bay—together but as separate as ever.

One can see them standing there, two seasoned veterans of courtroom performance, each confident in their powers of persuasion, trying to persuade someone they each know in their heart is unpersuadable. Two irresistible forces clash against immovable objects, with the cool, beautiful morning wide before them.

Somewhere across the bay that stretches out before them, somewhere across an Atlantic neither has ever yet crossed, lay England—a very real power looming above every word they trade even if it's also an abstract idea that neither man has ever experienced directly.



Munjoy Hill today, topped by the Portland Observatory, viewed from across Portland Harbor. (bs)

"Great Britain is determined on her system," Sewall tells Adams; "her power is irresistible and would certainly be destructive to you, and to all those who should persevere in opposition to her designs."

"I know Great Britain is determined on her system, and that very determination, determines me on mine," Adams counters. "You know I have been constant and uniform in opposition to all her measures. The die is now cast. I have passed the Rubicon. Swim or sink, live or die, survive or perish with my country—[that] is my unalterable determination."

Adams can barely contain himself. Atop the hill, he bursts with energy and enthusiasm like fireworks going off, as rational as Sewell and yet animated by passion. With Adams, it is always passion. A cooler approach might at least sustain the friendship, he knows, but he cannot surrender the point. Not until late in life will he learn the skill of holding his tongue in deference to friendship when it comes to radioactive topics.

"I see we must part," Adams says, defeated yet victorious, "and with a bleeding heart, I say, I fear forever. But you may depend upon it, this adieu is the sharpest thorn on which I ever sat my foot."

How they departed, neither said. Did they depart together in awkward, frustrated silence? Did one leave without the other? Did one storm off? Did one stay

and watch the morning traffic in the harbor, reflecting on their long and ill-fated friendship?

* * *

Only a few weeks after their hilltop meeting, violence came knocking on Sewall's front door when an anti-British mob targeted his house. He wasn't home at the time, and his wife managed to disband the mob by distributing bottles from the family wine cellar. The Sewalls retreated into Boston under the protection of the British army, but ashamed of his countrymen and what he saw as a deteriorating political situation, Sewall eventually packed up his family and moved to England, settling in Bristol and changing the spelling of the family's last name to "Sewell."

In 1785, while serving as the U.S. minister to the Court of St. James's, Adams sought out his old friend.

"Our Conversation was just such as might be expected at the Meeting of two old sincere friends after a long separation," Sewell wrote with pleased astonishment (and a new "e" in his last name). "Adams has a heart formed for friendship, and susceptible of its finest feelings; he is humane, generous and open—warm in his friendly Attachments tho' perhaps rather implacable to those whom he thinks his enemies. . . ."

For Adams, friendship ultimately trumped politics. Yet it proved a bittersweet reunion for him, and a bitter reunion for Sewell. Neither man had changed their politics or their minds about the Revolution, but at least Adams had the benefit of being on the winning side of history by then. He ever after considered Sewell a casualty of the war.

End of Unedited Excerpt