

John Adams [1735-1826]

by David McCullough (2001)

John Adams [JA] graduated from Harvard in 1755. He was a voracious reader. He had a 2 yr internship with a lawyer & passed the bar in '59. 1761 his dad died & in '64 he married Abigail [AA]. As his practice prospered, he bought more land. His business suffered severely when he defended some British soldier for their part in the Boston Massacre.

Philadelphia [the largest (30,000 in 1776) & wealthiest city in America] became the seat of government for the colonists. Adams was a visionary that could quickly see the larger picture. Knowing his hour had come, he rose to the occasion with passion, & a sense of urgency.

Adams took his son [JQA] with him to France. They both learned to speak French & loved the country, but he did not like to forwardness of the women [Ben Franklin (BF) loved it]. BF did not listen to his own advice [early to bed... & frugality], but he had wealth from his inventions. William Alexander & Ed Bancroft were both British spies.

The contrast of Adams [JA] & Jefferson [TJ] was great, but their common bond was their love for their country. JA had no slaves while TJ had many. JA avoided debt at all costs; TJ was the opposite [spending what he didn't have]. JA lost his life savings twice. When JA died, he had a net worth of \$100,000 & TJ was in debt the same.

1765 The Stamp Act [repealed in 1 yr] helped Britain pay for the French & Indian War ['54-63]

1776 The pamphlet *Common Sense* became a clarion call that rallied Americans [2.5M] to independence like no other. JA lobbied the hardest in congress & TJ drafted the Declaration of Independence [they were the voice & the pen].

1776 George Washington [GW] only had 9000 untrained soldiers [& no navy] & few supplies

1776Jul2 Congress approved the Declaration of Independence

1776Aug2 Congress signed the Declaration of Independence

1776Aug22 15,000 trained British troops invaded Long Island [fog allowed GW to move his men to safety in the night]

1777 War brought Inflation to 400% & it was hard to find the basic necessities

1777Sep26 British troops occupied Philadelphia

1777Oct Americans won the battle at Saratoga

1777Nov27 Congress sent JA [along with BF & later TJ] to France to negotiate an alliance

1778Feb6 France signed the alliance due to the triumph at Saratoga

1778Jun Britain attacked French ships & were at war again

1779Aug2 JA came home & wrote the state constitution for MA

1779Nov15 JA returned to France [ship began to leak & they barely reached Spain, then had to cross the Pyrenees in winter]. They French became tired of war & wanted to keep America poor & dependent.

1780 JA went to Holland [Amsterdam was the wealthiest city in the world] for a loan

1780 Gen Benedict Arnold turned over West Point to the British

1781Oct19 Gen Cornwallis surrendered to Gen Washington at Yorkton, VA

1782Mar28 Holland recognized American independence [& later setup the 1st US embassy]

1782 JA got a \$2M loan from Holland & signed a treaty of commerce

- 1782 JA, BF & John Jay negotiated with Britain for land east of the MS River & fishing rights off the Grand Banks
- 1783Sep3 Britain finally acknowledged the United States [the revolution had ended]
- 1784 Abigail sailed for France [next 4 yrs were the best yrs of their lives]
- 1785 Barbary pirates [north coast of Africa] fleeced Britain & France for almost \$1/2M
- 1787 JA wrote many papers on the defense of the Constitution & asked Holland for another loan. TJ was a close family friend there [but not later].
- 1787Sep17 Constitution of the US was signed in Philadelphia
- 1788 the Adams family returned home
- 1789 GW was elected president & JA vice-president [both re-elected in 1793]
- 1789 French revolution began [July 14 in Bastille]
- 1790 Ben Franklin died
- 1793 Yellow fever was killing 100/day in Philadelphia & Britain attacks American ships
- 1793-1815 Britain & France were at war again
- 1794 John Quincy Adams [JQA] became minister to the Netherlands
- 1796 was the 1st presidential election with 2 parties [JA pres & TJ VP]
- 1797 France was attacking American ships & JA pushed for a navy [50 ships in 3 yrs]
- 1798 Napoleon [NB] was sweeping across Europe & US opinion turned against France. Many US ports were building their own warships.
- 1799 JA strengthened the navy while he negotiated peace [he did not want a strong army in the hands of Hamilton who wanted to be another Napoleon]. GW died.
- 1800 Govt moved into the new [10 mi sq] Wash DC capitol & white house; treaty with France & disbanded US active army. TJ elected Pres.
- 1803 JQA was elected a US senator; JA lost \$13,000 & son helped him back; Napoleon lost much of his army to yellow fever in San Domingo & sold LA to US
- 1804 Alexander Hamilton was killed in a duel with VP Aaron Burr [probably of slander]
- 1809 James Madison became pres & sent JQA as minister to Russia
- 1812 US was a war again with Britain, but war ended between JA & TJ who hadn't spoken in 11 yrs, then started writing [encouraged by Ben Rush]
- 1813 NB was retreating from the cold winter or Moscow
- 1814 Britain burned DC, and then JQA helped negotiate peace to the war of 1812
- 1815 Waterloo ended NB wars & TJ sold his 6700 books to the govt for \$24,000
- 1817 Monroe became pres & JQA came home to be sec of state
- 1818 AA died
- 1825 JQA became pres & visited his dad one more time
- 1826Jul4 JA & TJ died [the last of those who signed the declaration of Independence]; one had a net worth of \$100,000 & the other was \$100,000 in debt.

Note: for every British soldier that died in battle, 17 died of disease. It would take 3 weeks to cross the Atlantic in summer & 9 in winter, and 6 months to get a reply to a letter. The French culture was so different that 6000 babies were given to Paris orphanages each year. TJ lost his wife & 4 out of 6 children. JA loved Cicero & agreed there should be 3 branches of government. US population went from 2M in 1776 to 4M in 1789. JA 1789 VP salary was \$5000/yr. The VP was then determined by whoever got the 2nd most votes. 1797 pres salary = \$25000/yr. Hamilton & TJ were working party lines & playing politics behind JA back. As pres, JA spent 2 hrs/day to see visitors. AA was JA best advisor [he should not have kept GW

cabinet]. A war with France in 1799 would have been disastrous. Retirement yrs were the happiest for JA [removed from politics].

Books: Diseases of the Mind (Benjamin Rush [father of American psychiatry])

Quotes: Adams was “not graceful nor elegant, nor remarkably fluent, [but spoke] with a power of thought and expression that moved us from our seats.” (TJ)

“Affliction is a good man’s shining time.” (Edward Young)

A river increases its volume the farther it flows from its source. (Abigail Adams [AA] referring to her love for her husband & his travels) “My pen is always freer than my tongue.” (AA)

“Affection still lingers in the bosom, even after esteem has taken flight.” (AA)

“Be good & do good.” “When a man is hurt, he loves to talk about his wounds.” (JA) Without a diary, travels are no better than a flight of birds through the air [leaving no trace] (JA) “Arouse your courage, to be determined to be something in this world.” (JA)

“That government is best which governs least.” (Thomas Paine)

“It is difficulties that show what men are.” (Epictetus)

“Patience & perseverance will carry you with honor through all difficulties.” (JQA)

Story: An eagle swooped down & grabbed a cat [thinking it a rabbit]. In air the cat seized the eagle by the neck & fought back with its claws. The eagle let go, but the cat wouldn’t let go until the eagle flew lower. Britain was more willing to negotiate at the end.

Other sources: The British were counterfeiting US currency to make it worthless.