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John Adams


John Adams


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Born: October 30, 1735 in Braintree, Massachusetts, United States

Died: July 4, 1826 in Quincy, Massachusetts, United States

Nationality: American

Occupation: President (Government)

Updated: Jan. 1, 2006

Full Text:

ADAMS, JOHN. (1735–1826). Lawyer, U.S. congressman, diplomat, signer of the Declaration of Independence, vice-president under Washington and second U.S. president, Massachusetts. John Adams was born in Braintree (now Quincy), Massachusetts, on 19 October 1735 and graduated from Harvard in 1755. Admitted to the Boston bar three years later, Adams slowly built up a law practice. In October 1764 he married Abigail Smith, daughter of Reverend William and Elizabeth Quincy Smith, which not only brought him a wife who proved a lively and worthy partner but also gave him wide connections with prominent Massachusetts families.

Soon after graduating from Harvard, Adams took an interest in local politics and started writing for the newspapers. The Stamp Act crisis brought him into prominence as the author of the resolutions of protest that were sent by his hometown to its representatives in the legislature and upon which other towns modelled their own protests. Adams joined with Jeremiah Gridley and James Otis in presenting Boston's memorial on the closing of the courts and started a long contest with Massachusetts' lieutenant governor, Thomas Hutchinson.

EARLY PROFESSIONAL LIFE
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John Adams

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JOHN ADAMS became the second president of the United States when he took the oath of office in the packed House of Representatives on 4 March 1797. As he described this moving scene to his wife, there were "two dry eyes but Washington's at the sight of the sun setting full orb'd, and another rising, Adams." The new president understood well that no one could fill the role of the godlike father who had ensured respect for the newly created federal government. Could the office be filled by the first man of his time? From whom had he inherited no aura of superhuman greatness? It was a question that had come from the 'pleasure of exchanging Presidents without incident'--a sentiment that was also true of Andrew Jackson. The new president faced unresolved problems that could quickly tear at the fabric of the nation.

Early Life

Born on 19 October 1735, Adams was sixty-one when he took office. He had behind him thirty years of distinguished public service. His father, a respected farmer and artisan of Braintree, Massachusetts, had pointed him toward Harvard College and a career in the Congregational ministry. He took his degree in 1755, but by then theological uncertainty had turned him toward a secular vocation. He taught school briefly, then read law, and was admitted to the bar in 1768. Within a dozen years he became the colony's preeminent and busiest lawyer.

In defending such clients as John Hancock and other merchants accused of smuggling and sailors charged with rioting against press gangs of the Royal Navy, he was drawn into the local resistance movement. The Stamp Act of 1765 provoked him to argue in speech and in print against this parliamentary statute, which he termed an unconstitutional violation of colonial liberty. In 1770 he masterfully defended the British soldiers accused of murder in the Boston Massacre. He secured their acquittal while protecting the town's reputation against the charge that the soldiers had been unprovokedly hardened. He held several local offices and served a term in the Massachusetts House of Representatives. In retaliation for Adams's opposition to royal government, the governor twice vetoed his election to the Massachusetts Council. His law practice ended in 1774 when the colony and the developing nation began to demand all of his talents and energy.

In 1764, Adams had married Abigail Smith of neighboring Weymouth, Massachusetts, who was to make a major contribution to his public career. Without intending school, she had mastered the literature of the day and developed a remarkably perceptive intellect and an unshakable spirit. As John Adams became absorbed in politics and diplomacy, he increasingly left to her the responsibility of raising their four surviving children and managing the family's finances. At first impatient with the limitations of the private sphere to which women were confined, she in time accepted her husband's successes as her own and gladly took her place as his confidante and defender. There was a marriage of equals as far as the roles society assigned.
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