

1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era

Volume 19

Article 10

2012

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Recommended Citation

James J. Kirschke and Scott Grapin (2012) "FROM COLONIST TO REVOLUTIONARY John Adams (1735-1826)," *1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era*: Vol. 19, Article 10. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/sixteenfifty/vol19/iss1/10>

FROM COLONIST TO REVOLUTIONARY

John Adams (1735–1826)

James J. Kirschke and
Scott Grapin

*J*ohn Adams eventually became a leader of the American Revolution, and performed great service in the development of an independent United States. He was an extremely active and successful member of the First and Second Continental Congresses. He proved a spearhead leader on many important committees there; and he was an invaluable member of that body in the founding of the American Navy, not to mention the development of the Continental Army.

That John Adams is considered by most scholars to be a leader of the American Revolution, however, seems surprising for a number of reasons, large and small. For one thing, he lived as a British colonial for the first four decades of his life. In this historical period, the average American had already completed half of his working life by age forty and might reasonably be ex-

pected to be set in his ways.¹ But John Adams would come to a full-fledged stance on independence from British rule remarkably late in the development of both his life and the revolutionary sentiments of the American colonies. David McCullough's popular biography does address the "suspicion that Adams was a monarchist at heart. . . and understandably, as in his *Defence of the Constitutions of Government* he did seem to lean that way."² By contrast, both McCullough and John Patrick Diggins recognize that Adams's "Novanglus" letters express his inclination for independence.³ As Diggins notes, "Adams's essays anticipated the Declaration of Independence in rejecting any right whatsoever of Parliament to rule in the colonies."⁴ While acknowledging this tension in Adams's thought and character within the general appreciation of his ultimately revolutionary reputation, few studies, to our knowledge, have scrutinized Adams's transition from loyal subject of the British Crown to American revolutionary. In the paper that follows we hope to indicate the torturous path that Adams took to an independence stance. John Adams ably defended British Army Captain, Thomas Preston, and seven soldiers accused of murder in the so-called "Boston Massacre" of 1770. Two years later, in notes for an oration for his hometown, Braintree (now Quincy), he referred to the best kind of government as "mixed." But by this term Adams meant a combination of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. As late as 15 April 1814, in a letter to John Taylor (1753-1824), he remarked that "there is a natural aristocracy of virtues and talents in every nation and in every part, in every city and village."⁵ Taylor had long been an agricultural reformer and political philosopher primarily. The professed backbone of his agrarian beliefs was the strict maintenance of slavery as practiced especially in the British-run Southern Department (namely, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia) of the North American colonies (see Taylor's recently completed *Arator*, for instance, 1810-1813). Surely Adams perceived that his addressee, like himself and other prominent Founders, was "temperamentally aristocratic, mistrustful of the common people, and hopeful that America might somehow retain the essence of its colonial aristocracy or create a new, purer,

¹ Richard Alan Ryerson, "John Adams and the Founding of the Republic: An Introduction," in Ryerson, ed., *John Adams and the Founding of the Republic* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, Distributed by Northeastern University Press, 2001), 7.

² David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 409-10.

³ McCullough, *John Adams*, 71-72.

⁴ John Patrick Diggins, *John Adams* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2003), 27.

⁵ Charles Francis Adams, ed., *The Life and Works of John Adams* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1851), 6: 462.

natural aristocracy.”⁶ Thus, Adams could feel confident that in his references to “the natural aristocracy” he had, in Taylor, a sympathetic correspondent.⁷

John Adams always despised the kinds of mob action to which political revolutions and coups tend to give rise. He evidently played no part in the Tea Party which took place in the Boston Harbor, although afterward he applauded the brilliance of its planning and execution. Subsequently, he counseled the Tea Party revolutionaries and their followers not to reimburse the East India Company for losses it sustained in the raid. Nonetheless, Adams never served on any of the revolutionary committees of correspondence.

He was elected to the First Continental Congress in 1774. But this political body explicitly professed only to restore “liberty and harmony” between Great Britain and the colonies. The need for secrecy at this Congress was important. Nonetheless, Caesar Rodney of Delaware had remarked, with alarm, upon the strange silence concerning independence characterizing the large and influential Massachusetts delegation. Some members of the small North Carolina delegation, such as Joseph Hewes (1730–1779), subsequently remarked in writing that Rodney had been swayed to back the independence movement by the eloquence of Adam’s address at the Congress.

Before this, in 1768, Adams received election to the Massachusetts House of Representatives from Boston, to which he had moved with his young and growing family. After a year’s service in this provincial legislature, however, he wished strongly to return to his Braintree area law practice and inherited family farm.

Like many of the eventual leaders of the American Revolution, John Adams was fundamentally conservative. And like most of these eventual leaders, surprisingly late in the eighteenth century he sought vainly to avoid bloodshed with the Mother Country. For instance, when John sat in the aforementioned House as a representative from Boston, on 17 June 1768, he drafted instructions to its distinguished representatives—James Otis (1725–1783), Thomas Cushing (1725–1788), Samuel Adams (1722–1803), and John Hancock (1737–1793)—wherein he states,

it is our fixed resolution to maintain our loyalty and duty to our most gracious Sovereign, a reverence and due subordination to the British Parliament as the supreme legislative [*sic*] in all cases of ne-

⁶ Ryerson, “John Adams and the Founding,” 9.

⁷ See also William Pencak, “John Adams and the Massachusetts Elite,” in Ryerson, ed., *John Adams and the Founding*, 45, 47, 49, 52, 56–61.

cessity, for the preservation of the whole empire, and our cordial and sincere affection and for our parent country.⁸

For sure there is some ambiguity in the phrase "in all cases of necessity." Nevertheless, the tone of these instructions is mainly deferential to the Crown.

In 1774, as a member of the First Continental Congress, Adams wrote the eventually approved document then known as "The Bill of Rights: a List of Grievances." In these pages Adams's quill pen indicates that Americans claim the right to make laws "in all cases of taxation and internal polity," but "cheerfully consent" to British Parliamentary regulation of trade, out of regard to the mutual interest of both countries. Nor is this a new stance for him. The previous year he stated that the colonists were outside the realm, and thus beyond the jurisdiction, of the Parliament. But he expressed a willingness to permit Parliament to control American trade. His rationale for such a belief was that the colonies freely consented to British regulation. In this "Bill of Rights" he makes no reference to any compact rising out of the Navigation Acts, nor from colonial laws that had adopted the acts. Adams's version of Number 4 of the "Bill" left consent as the sole basis for the trade compact with Britain. And he reiterated this position in his side of the John Adams penned pamphlet battle, "Novanglus" (1775), with Loyalist Daniel Leonard that will be addressed in more detail below.

In the same vein, in a 28 December 1774 letter to James Burgh, from Braintree, Adams asserts, "I have bent my chief Attention to prevent a rupture [with Great Britain], and to impress my Friends with the importance of preventing it." The author concludes this paragraph with the statement: "What then would be the Consequence of a Battle in which, many Thousands must fall of the best Blood, the best Families, Fortunes, Abilities and moral Characters in the Country?"⁹ Adams's repetitious and capitalized emphasis on "the best Blood," and so forth, as though the Continental Army yet to be formed would fill its ranks entirely with comparatively privileged individuals, such as John Adams, seems revelatory. Adams, of course, never served in the armed forces; and comparatively few of his elite contemporaries at the time ever did either.

James Burgh (1714-1775) is an interesting figure, and Adams's cor-

⁸ Robert J. Taylor, et al., eds., *Papers of John Adams* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977-1996), 1: 216-17.

⁹ Taylor, *Papers of John Adams*, 2: 206.

respondence with him is itself revelatory. Burgh, who demonstrated his concern for the colonies by lobbying against the Townshend duties, was British-born and Scottish-educated. From the early 1760s through his death, he belonged actively to the Club of Honest Whigs, "friends of liberty" which included Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790), as well as Richard Price (1723–1791) and Joseph Priestley (1733–1804), two controversial dissenters who, like Burgh, advocated the patriot cause of America.¹⁰ Price gained renown for two pamphlets supporting the patriots, *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty* (1776) and *Additional Observations* (1777), but declined an invitation extended by Franklin, Adams, and Arthur Lee (1740–1792) to provide financial counsel for the American Congress.¹¹ Priestley, however, remembered more today for his identification of oxygen than for his political philosophy, left for Pennsylvania in 1794 after becoming unpopular for his anti-trinitarianism and support of the French Revolution. According to his custom of inspiring suspicion, his February 1798 article in the newspaper *Aurora*, "Maxims of political arithmetic," would be regarded by then President Adams as an indictment of his policies.¹² In Adams's thus writing in late 1774 to Burgh, he seems to be arguing against a break with the Crown to one of the three to six most ardent Whigs in Great Britain at the time.

This private avowal of loyalty to the Crown anticipated Adams's public one in *The Boston Gazette and Country Journal* less than three months later:

We are a part of the British dominions, that is of the king of Great Britain, and it is our interest and duty to continue so. It is equally our interest and duty to continue subject to the authority of parliament, in the regulation of our trade, as long as she shall leave us to govern our internal policy, and to give and grant our own money.¹³

¹⁰ Carla H. Hay, "Burgh, James (1714–1775)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/3992 (25 July 2007).

¹¹ D. O. Thomas, "Price, Richard (1723–1791)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn., May 2005), www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/22761 (25 July 2007).

¹² Robert E. Schofield, "Priestley, Joseph (1733–1804)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Sept 2004; online edn, May 2007), www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/22788 (25 July 2007).

¹³ Taylor, *Papers of John Adams*, 2: 326.

Here, on 6 March 1775, in the penultimate paragraph of “Novanglus” Number 7, less than two months before Lexington and Concord, Adams’s measured loyalty to the king abides.

After the very important month in Boston area history, April 1775, Adams addressed the issue of his perception of the disjunction between New England egalitarianism and southern aristocracy. John saw this separation as manifest in the disparities in pay between officers and enlisted men, which was greater in the Southern Department colonies than in New England. But in response to a clear suggestion by Jonathan Dickinson Sergeant (1746–1793), of New Jersey and Pennsylvania, that slaves be set free for serving in the Continental Army, Adams merely changed the subject. This evasiveness on such an important societal issue is much in keeping with John’s evident and fundamental belief that the Revolution ought not to be a vehicle for instituting important societal alterations.

In the context of Adams’s evasiveness in regard to the selected manumission issue broached by Sergeant, worthy of note is that Jonathan proved no fringe area radical of either the right or the left. In partial proof of this statement is that, in 1774, he became clerk of the New Jersey Convention, which selected the delegates from New Jersey to the Continental Congress. The following year Sergeant became secretary of the Continental Congress. In early and late 1776, he furthermore served briefly in the Continental Congress. He resigned this post for part of the year, however, to become a member of the New Jersey Provincial Congress, and to spearhead the committee framing a constitution for what became known as the Garden State. Moreover, Sergeant’s sensible and humane conception concerning the freeing of the military-serving slaves soon largely in effect became policy throughout the thirteen colonies.¹⁴

Indeed, on 26 May 1776, less than two months before the penning of the Declaration of Independence, John Adams argued in a letter to James Sullivan for the need to treat women—married, wealthily widowed, or unmarried in any financial condition—as if they were inherently inferior and dependent, in social and political theory, as well as in practice. According to Adams, “Women and Children, have as good Judgment, and as independent Minds as those Men who are wholly destitute of Property: these last being to all Intents and Purposes as much dependent upon others, who will please to feed, cloath, and employ them, as Women are upon their Husbands, or Children on their parents.”¹⁵

¹⁴ “Jonathan D. Sergeant” (University Archives and Records Center, University of Pennsylvania), www.archives.upenn.edu/histy/features/1700s/people/sergeant_jd.html (25 July 2007).

¹⁵ Taylor, *Papers of John Adams*, 4: 211.

Adams's attack on American womanhood in these remarks was in some ways characteristic of his disposition to "root for the upper dog" in social discussions of less privileged groups. As Carole Shammas has sagely noted, during the late Colonial period men likely held roughly 95 percent of the total wealth in the thirteen colonies. Shammas sensibly speculates that the major cause of this stark economic inequality stemmed from the absence of any property rights for married women. When women in America then married, ownership of all of what had been their personal property as well as the management of it devolved on their spouses. Nearly all propertied women during this period became married. And only in any unmarried widowhood period could the women exercise any degree of economic power. But even here widows often inherited less than one-third of the family estate, as, if the deceased husband had had children, intestacy statutes generally provided far less than one-third of the male testator's wealth for the dependent widow.

Particularly vulnerable at this time in America were women of the working poor classes. Many of the seemingly obvious jobs were unavailable to women. "Girls" were pretty much only "able" to hold workplace positions such as housekeeper, private nurse, seamstress, and, rarely, private family tutor. Small wonder that a number of women throughout the colonies turned to prostitution to try to "stay afloat" economically.¹⁶

James Sullivan (1744–1808), a fellow lawyer and politician, like Adams, had already become prominent and prosperous as a successful attorney by 1776. Sullivan served in the Massachusetts Provincial Assembly in 1774 and 1775. Also, in 1775 he served in the Bay State Committee for Safety. Throughout the Revolution, James served as a member of the lower house of the state's legislature. Plural office holding was not yet barred by law; and thus Sullivan sat from 1776 to 1782 on the Massachusetts Superior Court of Judicature. This body was at the time the highest court in Massachusetts. He also served, from 1779–81, as one of the three admiralty judges in Massachusetts, a very important post. Thus, obviously, James Sullivan was an extremely influential private citizen and public servant during the Revolutionary era. That Adams, with the Revolution beginning to heat up, and with the drafting of the Declaration of Independence not yet done, felt so strongly and addressed so freely such anti-womanist sentiments to Sullivan, speaks volumes about John's social conservatism.

¹⁶ Carole Shammas. "Early American Women and Control over Capital," in Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, eds., *Women in the Age of the American Revolution* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 150.

Adams also held what might be considered by many people as unprogressive, and perhaps even uncharitable, views of people with little or no material possessions or property. To James Sullivan, on 26 May 1776, he wrote, "Such is the frailty of the human heart that very few men [*sic*] who have no property, have any judgment of their own. They talk and vote as they are directed by some man of property, who has attached their minds to their [his] interests."¹⁷ Such tunnel-vision comments show up with vexing frequency among the elite and well book-educated leaders of the Revolution. In fact, Michael Warner, while questioning Adams's account in *A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law* (hereafter cited as *DC&FL*) of a Puritan flourishing literacy and print culture that lead to American emancipation, calls this a period of "intellectual revolution" by men of letters.¹⁸ It is also worth considering Adams's perspective in light of Charles Warren's observation that nowhere in the Colonies "were there any published reports of decided cases, prior to the Revolution."¹⁹ Any degree of truth in Adams's assessment might be attributable to a culture of letters still designed to privilege the voices of a relative minority enabled to speak and write as Adams does. Adams penned similar remarks steadily throughout his adult years.

Another persistent and seemingly Tory attitude of Adams can be seen in his often expressed attitudes toward "supporting titles" in governmental positions and elsewhere for positions of authority throughout society.²⁰ Even in John's much praised *A defence of the constitutions of government of the United States of America* (1787), the author, soon to become Washington's vice-president, proposes that "the rich, the well-born and the able" should be set apart from other men in the future U.S. Senate.²¹

On the other hand, glimpses of Adams the revolutionary leader started to become evident when he was as young as thirty and living in Boston with Abigail and their children. Here he opposed British revenue measures and their enforcement by the British army and navy. In somewhat characteristic

¹⁷ Charles Francis Adams, *The Life and Works*, 9:376.

¹⁸ Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 2–3, 67.

¹⁹ Charles Warren, *A History of the American Bar* (1911; reprint, New York: Howard Fertig, 1966), 4.

²⁰ C. Bradley Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1998), 268–69.

²¹ Adams, John, *A defence of the constitutions of government of the United States of America* (London, 1794; Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale Group), www.galenet.galegroup.com.ps2.villanova.edu/servlet/ECCO (29 July 2007), 1: xiv.

fashion, however, he began his protests in a moderate manner. Unlike his compatriots, Samuel Adams and James Otis, John refrained from participating in anti-British demonstrations, and from penning rhetorically inflammable articles and letters.

In 1765 Adams wrote the Braintree Instructions, an extended argument against the imposition of the Stamp Act. The Stamp Act constituted a targeted tax, imposed by the British Parliament, on paper products throughout the thirteen colonies. This Act imposed taxes on newspapers, pamphlets, legal documents, and licenses, as well as stamps. Thus, it figured to steadily penalize the day-to-day professional fortunes and personal communications of the literate, educated classes of which John was an aspiring member. His diary of this time reveals a sense of pressure being layered by the Stamp Act's disruption of affairs: "I have groped in dark obscurity, till of late, and had but just known and gained a small degree of reputation, when this project was set on foot for my ruin as well as that of America in general, and of Great Britain."²² These private sentiments reflect the extensive degree to which Adams saw his own threatened security as indicative of not only the colony's state but the Crown's as well. Meanwhile, his public rhetoric in the Instructions became widely read throughout Massachusetts and, thus, likely had at least some effect on the repeal of the aforesaid Act. But they by no means exerted the kind of central force that John himself seemed to think they had.

In his learned tome, *DC&FL*, which appeared in installments during 1765 in the *Boston Gazette*, Adams attacks what he terms "popery," but he also criticizes the Stamp Act. In Number 2 of *DC&FL*, John remarks that "popular powers must be placed as a guard, a controul, a balance, to the powers of the monarch, and the priest, in every government."²³ In Number 3 of *DC&FL* the author writes, "rulers are no more than attorneys, agents and trustees for the people; and if the cause, the interest and trust is insidiously betray'd, or wantonly trifled away, the people have the right to revoke the authority."²⁴ After he remarks that he believes that the British think that the Americans are an ignorant, stupid and cowardly people, he adds, "but I hope in God the time is near at hand, when they will be fully convinced of your [the Americans'] integrity and courage."²⁵ Such words sound as though Adams has made a giant step toward becoming an early Bay Colony Patrick Henry (1736-1799).

²² Charles Francis Adams, *The Life and Works*, 2: 155-56.

²³ Taylor, *Papers of John Adams*, 1: 115.

²⁴ Taylor, *Papers of John Adams*, 1: 121

²⁵ Taylor, *Papers of John Adams*, 1: 122.

After the repeal of the Stamp Act, John Adams evidently refused an offer from the Royal Governor to become Advocate General of the Vice Admiralty Court in Massachusetts. This seems to have been a principled decision. Adams was incensed because, in America, maritime revenues could be collected with the approval of a single judge, whereas in Britain they could be recovered only by means of a jury trial. In addition, John objected to the British-inspired proposal that the Massachusetts Admiralty Court judges be paid not from the American side but rather by the Crown, the same authority that ultimately appointed these judges.

Vice-Admiralty courts were in place throughout the colonies. Their purpose was to resolve disputes among merchants and seamen. What particularly vexed the Bay Colony residents was a provision of the Currency Act which established a kind of supreme Vice-Admiralty Court, in Halifax, Nova Scotia, for all of North America. For this court the judge was selected in, and sent to North America from, the United Kingdom. Officers in each of the local colonies could require that British merchants' complaints with seamen and other commercial disputes be heard in Halifax. Anyone who had been charged would then have to transport himself or herself to Nova Scotia, to appear before a biased court. Moreover, the defendants were considered guilty upon arrival, rather than the standard burden in British and Colonial law at the time—namely, innocent until proven guilty. In addition, those accused who were unable to pay for the transportation of themselves and any relevant witnesses to appear, as commanded, in Halifax, received an automatic verdict of guilty.

In 1774, in fact, Adams suggested that allowing the Superior Court judges to be paid by the Crown rather than by vote of the General Court abrogated the Massachusetts charter, and hence the Massachusetts constitution. He furthermore aggressively asserted that the judges' acceptance of payment from the Crown made them guilty of high crimes and misdemeanors; and thus these judges deserved impeachment. In a colony such as Massachusetts, with its great dependence on seaborne commerce, a counterstroke at the way that the Vice-Admiralty Courts, especially, had been arranged by Britain proved a serious challenge to British authority in the thirteen colonies.

During the same year, 1774, Adams commenced an extended pamphlet war with a then anonymous author, now known to be Loyalist Daniel Leonard (1740-1829), fellow Massachusetts lawyer. Like many of the Loyalists at the time, Leonard had held social, economic and political prominence in the Bay area for many decades. In 1774 Governor Thomas Hutchinson appointed him a mandamus councilor. Almost simultaneously the Crown dismissed the Massachusetts legislature. Soon thereafter, a Whig mob attacked Leonard's

house, firing muskets and breaking windows. He proved fortunate to escape with his life. When the British forces held Boston, Leonard served as customs officer within her lines. In his side of the quill pen war with Adams, Leonard proclaimed: "[could anyone be so deluded as to believe that Great Britain] would not be victorious against the disorganized American colonies?" He continues: "with the British navy in the front, the Canadians and savages in the rear, the regular army in our midst," the provinces would certainly be vanquished.²⁶

Adams signed his epistolary essays "Novanglus." In these pieces Adams argues that the American colonies do not belong to the realm, and are therefore not subject to Parliamentary authority. Massachusetts, along with the other New England colonies, Connecticut and Rhode Island, had been governed since their founding by Europeans as charter colonies. These colonies had been traditionally governed, without any direct interference from the British Crown, by charters granted to commercial trading companies. The other colonies had been founded as proprietary colonies. These colonies were established as royal land grants to individuals or groups of individuals. Under the proprietary system, the proprietor owned and politically controlled the colony, although the political power generally became delegated to colonial representatives. Until the Revolution, Delaware, Maryland and Pennsylvania remained proprietary colonies. By 1775, however, the remaining colonies had become royal provinces, each represented by a governor. These governors were appointed by the Crown, but were dependent for their salaries on a legislature selected by the voters of the relevant provinces.

In "Novanglus," Adams presses his point by reviewing with great erudition the historical and legal positions of Wales and Ireland relative to Great Britain. He explains that Britain's conquest of these areas did not render them subject to the authority of Parliament until particular steps were taken to secure the seeming consent of the Welsh and the Irish. The book-learned Adams, however, overlooks entirely the fact that no genuine steps had been taken to obtain Irish consent. He also concludes that the Americans would be willing to allow Parliament to regulate trade, and consent to such regulation, because the First Continental Congress stipulated as much in Article 4 of the 1774 Bill of Rights adopted in Philadelphia.

Adams furthermore, however, iterated in "Novanglus" Number 8 that the law of nature constituted the ultimate source of colonial liberties, and

²⁶ Carol Berkin, "Leonard, Daniel," *American National Biography Online* (Feb. 2000), www.anb.org/articles/01/01-00513.html (28 July 2007).

that the rights of all Englishmen are secured by contract with the King. This line of attack Adams might have been able to pursue with more vigor than he did, since British legal decisions, dating from the early 1700s, and still upheld through the 1770s, could indeed have bolstered Adams's thesis. But here, as in Number 4 of "Novanglus," the author clearly denies that Americans are seeking independence.

Adams's expressed view at this date in late 1774 was that the colonies were not part of the realm, and were therefore not subject to Parliament's authority. This opinion, however, was not a new idea for him. Beginning with *DC&FL*, in 1765, he had noted the modified feudal system under which the Puritans had held their lands in Massachusetts. And in 1773, he argued that the Massachusetts citizens' acceptance of land granted directly from the King had therefore freed the Bay Colony citizens from dependence upon Parliament.

Nonetheless, Adams's first surviving written piece indicating an earnest desire for independence from Great Britain evidently is his letter of 6 July 1775 to James Warren (1726-1808). In contrast to Adams, James Warren proved a steady patriot leader early in the dispute with Great Britain, and he remained so throughout the struggle. During the Stamp Act crisis of 1765, Warren had been selected as a colonel of the Plymouth Massachusetts militia and elected to the Massachusetts General Court. He held the latter post until 1778. As a result of his political struggles with royal governor Thomas Hutchinson, he was selected as Speaker of the House in 1769 and 1770. And, in 1772, on the advice of Samuel Adams, he established a local Committee of Correspondence. The husband of Mercy Otis Warren (1728-1814), James served as a key link between the Whigs in Plymouth and Boston. Unlike John Adams, Warren joined Samuel Adams in arousing opposition in Massachusetts to the Boston Port Act in 1774. In 1776, as a major general, James served with distinction in Rhode Island. And the following year he accepted appointment to the Continental Navy Board in Boston.²⁷ John's clearly spelling out his first known desire for independence to a long-standing and clearly professed patriot such as James Warren, then, makes a kind of good sense for Adams.

In Adams's new stance, assumed more than ten weeks after the daring midnight rides of Paul Revere (1734-1818), William Dawes (1745-1799), and last, but not least, Samuel Prescott (1751-1777), John explicitly advocates, for the first time, that we have [meaning deserve] "Governments of our

²⁷ Winfred E. A. Bernhard, "Warren, James," *American National Biography Online* (Feb. 2000), www.anb.org/articles/01/01-00937.html (28 July 2007).

own." This new position is greatly at variance with his explicit position, as late as the "Novanglus" letters, wherein he had argued in writing for separate states under a common British king.²⁸

What brought about this significant change in Adams's published stance? Very likely conversations and correspondence with his decidedly Whiggish wife, Abigail, proved important. For instance, when their son John Quincy Adams was only seven years old, she took him to watch the fighting on Bunker Hill, so that the boy could better understand the costs of independence and absorb the sacrifices needed to obtain and defend it. Thereafter, on 16 March 1776, Abigail overoptimistically wrote to John: "every foot of ground which they [the British forces] obtain...they must fight for, and may they purchase it at a Bunker Hill price."²⁹ But not until 11 April 1776, roughly a year after Lexington and Concord, did Abigail write to Adams from Braintree that the potential Boston area jurors had begun to refuse to do jury duty, "because the writs are issued in the King's name."³⁰ Such letters suggest the extent to which John might have valued Abigail's input when she was encountering the daily effects of British presence and he was far away in Philadelphia participating in the Congress. These proximate differences in distance to the actual conflict might partly account for what Lynne Withey identifies as Abigail's emphasis on the moral and daily reality of war while Adams was immersed in theoretical and political concerns.³¹ Even if Abigail's words did simply "echo the conventional rhetoric of revolutionary patriotism," as Edith B. Gelles observes, they were words written with the consistent influence of intimacy. At the very least, Adams's removed desire for unity would be tempered by Abigail's direct experience of division.³²

To sum up, then, John Adams proved overall an eloquent member of the first two Continental Congresses. And all things considered, as a politician and an ambassador, he served the fledgling America well. But he does not appear to have been a clear leader in the vanguard of colonial revolutionary public action and expression. Instead, Adams's tendencies illustrated his preference for a mixed government of monarchy, aristocracy, and limited democ-

²⁸ Taylor, *Papers of John Adams*, 2: 263, 336.

²⁹ Frank Shuffleton, ed., *The Letters of John Adams and Abigail Adams* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 143.

³⁰ Shuffleton, *The Letters of John Adams and Abigail Adams*, 152.

³¹ Lynne Withey, *Dearest Friend: A Life of Abigail Adams* (1981; reprint, New York: Touchstone, 2002), 55, 67.

³² Edith B. Gelles, *Portia: The World of Abigail Adams* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 13-14.

racy. As a House Representative in 1768, he instructed others to remain loyal to the crown, and in 1770 he defended a British captain and soldiers against murder charges stemming from the Boston Massacre. As late as February 1775, he avowed this loyalty as *Novanglus*.

Complementing these Tory inclinations was a social conservatism averse to conflict with Britain for fear that "the best Blood" would be spilled. Similarly, Adams avoided the topic of manumitting slaves who would fight for the Continental Army. Accordingly, he demonstrated his reluctance to institute changes in a society which included, in his estimation, such socially and politically inferior members as men with little property and women. Well beyond the outset of the Revolution, in fact, he expressed clearly undemocratic social beliefs and stuffily aristocratic conceptions in his elaborate support of governmental titles, and in his 1787 proposal to set apart the wealthy and well-born from other members of the U.S. Senate.

At the same time, our picture of Adams is complicated by his principled defenses of the colonies. He might not have been inclined to such mob action as precipitated the Boston Tea Party, but he did counsel those same revolutionaries not to reimburse the East India Company for their damages. At thirty years old, he opposed British revenue measures by arguing publicly against the Stamp Act imposition. Moreover, his challenge, in 1774, to the appointment and payment of Massachusetts Admiralty Court judges by the Crown constituted a serious challenge to British Authority in the thirteen colonies.

Adams's confrontation of the Vice Admiralty Courts and opposition to the Stamp Act might imply a foundation for outright revolutionary positions that were not explicitly stated for reasons of personal philosophy reflected in his blue-blood commentaries on social standing or, perhaps, for reasons of public and political prudence. The fact that he chose to articulate his stance against British domination in a private letter to the steady patriot James Warren, for example, suggests an appropriate, yet cautious, concern over risking his public persona and endangering his personal welfare.

No doubt many of his conversations with his firebrand spouse worked steadily on Adams's consciousness to help move him, eventually, and in spite of his estimation of women as politically inferior, to a stance against British domination, of whatever kind. But Adams did not articulate such an attitude clearly until his letter to James Warren on 6 July 1775. By that time, his claim for "Governments of our own" constituted a stance for American independence that exceeded the restraint of his recent argument, in "*Novanglus*," for separate states under a common king. Late as it was, more than ten weeks after Paul Revere's ride, Adams finally expressed a clear inclination toward independence.