



Perspectives on Early America

IMAGINARY FRIENDSHIP IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

JOHN ADAMS AND JONATHAN SEWALL

Colin Nicolson and Owen Dudley Edwards



Imaginary Friendship in the American Revolution

Imaginary Friendship is the first in-depth study of the onset of the American Revolution through the prism of friendship, focusing on future US president John Adams and leading Loyalist Jonathan Sewall. The book is part biography, revealing how they shaped each other's progress, and part political history, exploring their intriguing dangerous quest to clean up colonial politics. Literary history examines the personal dimension of discourse, resolving how Adams's presumption of Sewall's authorship of the Loyalist tracts *Massachusettensis* influenced his own *magnum opus*, *Novanglus*. The mystery is not why Adams presumed Sewall was his adversary in 1775 but why he was impelled to answer him.

Colin Nicolson is a Lecturer in History at the University of Stirling.

Owen Dudley Edwards is an Irish historian and former Reader in Commonwealth and American History at the University of Edinburgh.

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To All Our Friends



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Abbreviations

<i>Founders Online</i>	<i>Founders Online</i> (http://founders.archives.gov).
AA	Abigail Adams (1744–1818).
<i>Adams–Jefferson Letters</i>	Lester J. Cappon, ed. <i>The Adams–Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams</i> . 1957; Chapel Hill, N.C.: 1987.
ADM	Admiralty, and Ministry of Defence, Navy Department: Correspondence and Papers. Legal Correspondence, 1762–1770, ADM 2/1057; Board’s Minutes, 1768–1769, ADM 3/76. TNA.
AFC	Lyman H Butterfield, Marc Friedlaender, Richard Alan Ryerson, et al., eds. <i>Adams Family Correspondence</i> . 12 Vols. to date. Cambridge, Mass: 1963–.
AFP	Massachusetts Historical Society. <i>The Adams Family Papers, 1639–1889</i> . Microfilm Edition. 608 reels. Ann Arbor, Mich., 1954.
American Historical Newspapers, 1690–2010	Newsbank Inc. <i>America’s Historical Newspapers. Archive of Americana. Early American Newspapers Series 1, 1690–1876</i> . Available via subscription at GenealogyBank.com. 2008–.
AO 12	American Loyalists Claims, Series 1. AO 12. TNA.
AO 13	American Loyalists Claims, Series 2. AO 13. TNA.
<i>Bernard Papers</i>	Colin Nicolson, ed. <i>The Papers of Francis Bernard, Governor of Colonial Massachusetts, 1760–69</i> . 6 Vols. Boston, 2007–.
CHAR	John P. Reid. <i>Constitutional History of the American Revolution: Vol. 1. The Authority of Rights Vol. 2. The Authority of Rights Vol. 3. The Authority to Legislate. Vol. 4. The Authority of Law</i> . Madison, Wisc., 1986–93.
Chipman Papers	Library and Archives of Canada: Lawrence Collection: Chipman Papers. 81 Vols. Vol. 1: Letters Received,

	1767–1823, microfilm reel C-1179; Vol. 6: Letter-books and Drafts, microfilm reel C-1180.
CO 5	Colonial Office Records, Colonial Office Series. TNA.
CO 5/763	Secretary of State and American Colonies. Original Correspondence of Secretary of State, 1773–1774. CO 5/763. TNA.
CO 5/829	Massachusetts, Council Executive Records, 1769–1774. CO 5/829. TNA.
CO 37/68	Despatches from Samuel Trott and Sir James Cockburn, governor of Bermuda, 1811. CO 37/68. TNA.
DAJA	Lyman H. Butterfield, Leonard C. Faber and Wendell D. Garrett, eds. <i>Diary and Autobiography of John Adams</i> . 4 Vols. Cambridge, Mass., 1961.
DAR	K. G. Davies, ed. <i>Documents of the American Revolution, 1770–1783</i> . 21 Vols. Shannon, 1972.
DL	Daniel Leonard (1740–1829).
HLJ	<i>Journals of the House of Lords, 1688–1834</i> . 66 Vols. Vols. 30–32. London [1771–1808]. House of Commons Parliamentary Papers. ProQuest and University of Southampton (http://parlipapers.chadwyck.co.uk).
JA	John Adams (1735–1826).
JAL	The John Adams Library at the Boston Public Library (www.johnadamslibrary.org).
JHRM	<i>The Journals of the House of Representatives of Massachusetts, 1715–1779</i> . 55 Vols. Boston, 1919–1990.
JS	Jonathan Sewall (1729–96).
LAC	Library and Archives of Canada.
LPJA	L. Kinvin Wroth and Hiller B. Zobel, eds. <i>Legal Papers of John Adams</i> . 3 Vols. Cambridge, Mass., 1965.
Mass. Archs.	Massachusetts Archives Collection, Records, 1629–1799. 328 Vols. SC1-45x. Massachusetts Archives.
MHi	Massachusetts Historical Society.
NEHGR	<i>New England Historical and Genealogical Register</i> .
NEQ	<i>The New England Quarterly</i> .
<i>Novanglus, and Massachusettensis</i>	<i>Novanglus, and Massachusettensis; Or, Political Essays, Published in the Years 1774 and 1775, on the Principal Points of Controversy, between Great Britain and Her Colonies. the Former by John Adams . . . the Latter by Jonathan Sewall . . . to which are Added, a Number of Letters, Lately Written by President Adams to the Honourable William Tudor. . . .</i> Boston, 1819.
NWR	<i>Niles' Weekly Register</i> .

PJA	Robert J. Taylor, Mary-Jo Kline, and Gregg L. Lint, et al., eds. <i>Papers of John Adams</i> . 18 Vols. to date. Cambridge, Mass., 1977-.
Procs.	<i>MHS Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society</i> .
Sewell Papers	Library and Archives of Canada: Sewell Papers. 20 Vols. Vol. 2: Correspondence, n.d., 1681-1799, microfilm reel H-2553; Vol. 3: Correspondence, 1790-1799, microfilm reel H-2554; Vol. 14: Miscellaneous, n.d., 1650-1788, microfilm reel H-2560.
T 1	Treasury: Treasury Board Papers and In-Letters, 1557-1922. T 1. TNA.
TJ	Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826).
TNA	The National Archives of the UK: Public Record Office, London.
Warren-Adams Letters	<i>Warren-Adams Letters being Chiefly a Correspondence among John Adams, Samuel Adams, and James Warren, 1743-1814</i> . Boston, 1917.
WC	Ward Chipman Sr. (1754-1824).
WJA	Charles Francis Adams, ed. <i>The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States</i> , 10 Vols. Boston, 1850-56.
WMQ	<i>The William and Mary Quarterly</i> , third series.

Editorial Note

Transcription. Original spelling has been retained with limited modernization. Editorial interpolations are in italics within brackets. **Citations.** Unless otherwise noted, scriptural citations are from the King James Bible, Shakespeare's plays at Shakespeare Online, ed. Amanda Mabillard (www.shakespeare-online.com), and classics from Perseus Digital Library, ed. Gregory H. Crane (www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/). **Political terminology.** Whig and Tory: deriving from British politics, these terms were applied to political factions during the Imperial Crisis of 1765 to 1774. The terms *Patriot* and *Loyalist* refer to pro- and anti-revolutionary groups between 1775 and 1783 (though contemporaries often used Whig and Tory and the divisions were apparent earlier in Massachusetts, from late summer 1774). **Massachusettensis and Novanglus.** Roman type denotes the pseudonym, as their authors intended; italics indicates the published letters.

Preface

The internalised other is . . . potentially somebody rather than nobody, and somebody other than me. He can provide the focus of real social expectations, of how I shall live if I act in one way rather than another, of how my actions and reactions will alter my relations to the world about me.

—Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (1993; London, 1994, 84)

This book is a history of an argument between friends who imagined friendship could transform their world. For fifteen years they argued about who they were, what they ought to be, and what they were becoming. A private quarrel grew into a public dispute under cover of pseudonyms in rival newspapers. Fearing civil war, they drew comparisons with the Roman republic when it succumbed to tyranny in the mid-first century BC. One friend, bedazzled by the lure of imperial splendor, bewailed threats from within and from democracy yet secretly desired to make Rome anew. The whirlwinds of history cast him adrift. The other feared more the tyranny of kings and oligarchs and dreamed of founding a new Rome in his own country.

The friends' argument is a literary moment in the history of the American Revolution, when, as "Massachusettensis" and "Novanglus," they contested the great issues of the day in a series of epistolary essays published on the eve of war between Britain and her American colonies. Novanglus was John Adams, one of New England's most successful lawyers when he set out to justify Americans' right to resist obnoxious British policies. He imagined saving his country from a conspiracy of self-interested men as Rome's Cicero had apparently done. Writing *Novanglus* turned Adams into a revolutionary Patriot and nation builder. Massachusettensis stood firm against the passage of time. The British Empire he artfully and skillfully defended, evoking images of civil war and stoking the fires of resentment by inviting a Loyalist counterrevolution against the Patriot rebellion. Massachusettensis was an enigma but not to John Adams, who imagined him to be his close friend Jonathan Sewall. Their

friendship itself was not imaginary, but the experience of friendship led Adams to create an imaginary adversary when writing *Novanglus*. Later, Adams and Sewall both idealized their friendship, creating an imagined friendship beyond reality; although unattainable, the ideal was reflective of experience, both finding virtue and moral worth in the imaginary itself. Such imaginings seem at odds with the general ideological question as to the making of the American Revolution: Did ideology stem from interests or take precedence of them? The actual debate between *Novanglus* and *Massachusettensis* may seem an exceptionally strong instance of the latter in Adams's case and of the former with the author of *Massachusettensis*. But when viewed through the prism of friendship the debate appears deeply personal for Adams; hitherto, ideological differences had been negotiable.

Friendship as an analytical category enhances the study of interpersonal political history. Just as recent scholarship embraced emotion, gender, intimacy, and sexuality, friendship proffers new vistas when writing the lives of the famous and the obscure. The literatures of the private sphere and the personal dimension are so rich and extensive that we cannot aspire to do justice to each or any (and we absolve ourselves from the obligation to sacrifice space to bibliographical essays). Our own intellectual curiosity is driven by the inscrutability of friendship itself. Every friendship is unique. We can never be certain how any friendship functioned. Rarely are friendships documented in detail. But with John Adams and Jonathan Sewall we have an opportunity to undertake a microhistory of friendship.¹ We see the conflict between ideal friendship (the friendship they imagined) and real friendship (the friendship they experienced). We also see tensions between loyalty to friends and loyalty to country. These are timeless dilemmas. But the politics of friendship (how friendships operate) and political friendship (how they influence politics) are understudied by historians of the American Revolutionary era, although cultural historians and biographers have advanced our grasp of friendship's nature and functionality.² Striving to unearth hidden meaning in elusive traces of friendship enriches our understanding of the lives of people we thought we knew and their personal revolutionary transformations.

This book is a friendship biography of John Adams and Jonathan Sewall. It examines how *their* friendship shaped *their* revolution and how they became adversaries and enemies. We hope to convey the immediacy of the argument, the unspoken assumptions, the meaning of allusions, the inferences and references, and the tensions latent and manifest in their friendship. We must also be conscious of friendship being cumulative as well as immediate: a shared past continually haunts a contentious and rapidly changing present. The hardest blows are often delivered with swords tempered in a common fire.

Notes

1. Previous discussions include Page Smith, *John Adams*, 2 vols. (Westport, CT, 1969), 1: 645–6; Carol Berkin, *Jonathan Sewall: Odyssey of an American Loyalist* (New York, NY, 1974), 14–15; Owen Dudley Edwards, “The Writers of the American Revolution—Variations on a Theme by Auden,” in *America and Ireland, 1776–1976: The American Identity and the Irish Connection*, ed. Owen Dudley Edwards and David Doyle (Westport, CT, 1980), 15–41; David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York, NY, 2001), 34–6, 71; Colin Nicolson, Owen Dudley Edwards, et al., “A Case of Identity: *Massachusettsensis* and John Adams,” *NEQ*, 91 (forthcoming 2018).
2. Ivy Schweitzer, *Perfecting Friendship: Politics and Affiliation in Early American Literature* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2006); Richard Godbeer, *The Overflowing of Friendship: Love Between Men and the Creation of the American Republic* (Baltimore, MD, 2009); Cassandra A. Good, *Founding Friendships: Friendships Between Men and Women in the Early American Republic* (Oxford and New York, NY, 2015). Founder biographies have made important contributions to the field, notably Andrew Burstein, *The Inner Jefferson: Portrait of a Grieving Optimist* (Charlottesville, VA, 1995), and Joseph J. Ellis, *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (New York, NY, 2002).

Acknowledgments

Devised in friendship and dedicated to all our friends, this book engages the proposition that friendship matters to historians and to history. Friendship is elusive for those writing its history and expecting certainty. Understanding is found only in its pursuit. The authors of this book have been friends for over thirty years. The book's history is older.

Owen Dudley Edwards: I was a graduate student at Johns Hopkins for the third year, in which I shared a flat with my father, Robert Dudley Edwards, in Washington, D.C. He was on a lecture tour of the United States, his first time away from our native Ireland. I was investigating the American Image of Ireland at the Library of Congress, where I found *Novanglus* in Charles Francis Adams's edition of his grandfather's *Life and Works*. I had found uses of Ireland as precedent, yardstick, or contrast in the writings of several American polemicists, notably John Dickinson, Benjamin Franklin, and Alexander Hamilton, but nothing like the detail or intensity of *Novanglus* on the subject of Ireland could be found in theirs. This was before the days of Xerox copying or electric typewriters, and I copied out all *Novanglus* said about Ireland and, when I had it on my file cards, brought it home to show Father. He was a leader of professional Irish historians at this time, Professor of Modern Irish History at University College Dublin, his own Irishness being from his Clare-born mother, daughter of teachers and descendant of Catholic peasants. My own mother was an Irish Catholic teacher from Cork. Our automatic Irish context would thus be rural, southern, and Catholic despite both of us being Dublin-born. Father had been working in Library of Congress collections as well, chiefly on the Irish history holdings. He had helped many American scholars with their research in Ireland but had a native's sardonic tongue to skin the complacency of foreigners who thought they knew Ireland. His reaction to the tenth letter of *Novanglus* was almost explosive. He had no idea who John Adams was and was staggered to discover he had never been in Ireland, had never been anywhere outside New England save for his Congressional sojourn in Philadelphia. But as far as Father was concerned this unknown polemicist understood Ireland as no American in any century ever had, so far as he knew. Adams had

an Irish historical mind. It is nearly sixty years ago (well, fifty-seven), but I can almost hear his voice rising high in delight at the intellectual quality of what he was reading.

Colin Nicolson: I was born in 1961, the year my coauthor found *Novanglus*. I was a graduate student at Edinburgh when I first encountered *Massachusettensis*. It was the summer of 1985, much of it spent in the rare book reading room of the British Library reading the Loyalist pamphlets of the American Revolution. None bristled with such artfulness in playing the politics of fear. My coauthor was then my PhD supervisor, and the following year I began researching the Loyalists at the Massachusetts Historical Society, commencing a professional career which for the most part has been devoted to the Imperial Crisis. Jonathan Sewall and John Adams, I met early on, albeit long after my coauthor had written and broadcast on their friendship and likened it to an imaginary friendship. The historical traces of the friendship I found were beguiling, yet intriguing. Did their ruptured friendship play out in *Novanglus* as Britons and Americans? The book project began not in discovery but in friendship in the summer of 2007. No one, as far as we could tell, had considered how Adams's presumption of Sewall's authorship of *Massachusettensis* shaped the writing of *Novanglus* and *Massachusettensis*. Did it matter? We soon realized how much historians have to learn about friendship in distant times and places. When Adams started writing *Novanglus* sometime in January 1775, he was not so much entering a fresh contest as aiming to crown a long-standing friendly rivalry with Jonathan Sewall. *Novanglus* was recognizably John Adams, but who was *Massachusettensis*? Both the writing and the reading of *Novanglus* and *Massachusettensis* were intellectual endeavors befitting a turning point in history—a season when the voices of revolution and counterrevolution thundered, severally and interchanging. Lest the reader of this book worry that its authors are hearing too many voices, we offer the following reassurance.

We started this book when already committed to other projects. We maintained impetus with essays and weekly discussions, hoping to instill a sense of urgency in our thinking as it was in theirs, knowing that the authors of *Novanglus* and *Massachusettensis* had not the privilege of conversation. We reread the original letters closely, in sequence. We tried to think of the writers simultaneously eyeing their strategy, adapting it as the debate continued, and working out immediate tactics from week to week. We marveled at their productivity, managing between them about one hundred thousand words in just twelve weeks (sixty-three thousand plus for *Novanglus* and nearly forty-four thousand for *Massachusettensis*). We unwrapped their creations, interrogated the literary personae, and gazed fondly on their intellectual indulgences. We admired their intellectualism, for their letters range across history, law, literature, and scripture while delving into the politics of the day. We rummaged in their cluttered personal histories, conscious that we are part of the future to which their

imaginary friendship spoke. We finished full of admiration for our subjects' stamina and breadth of learning and regrets for our own prolixity. Then we began again, this time writing of their friendship.

This book is a history of both the history that Novanglus and Massachusetts were making and of the history that they were then writing. Our own recent history indubitably is reflected in these pages. The child independence Adams believed born in 1761 found adulthood early, in rebellion in 1776. The politics of fear that characterized 1775–76 is germane to all constitutional debates, as it was in the great questions of Scottish and Catalan Independence and Brexit when this book was being written. Adams's idea of parallel sovereignty seems altogether more relevant. Intrigue, too, captivates such players, and this book was completed when investigations into the 2016 US presidential election campaigns were in the media spotlight. But that's politics. Friendship thrives on compromise, integrity, love, rationality, shared history, and secrets shared.

We are indebted to all our friends, not least to Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, the late Peter Marshall, Lynn Hudson Parsons, and Neil Longley York for inspiration; to our colleagues at the National Library of Scotland, where we met often to exchange ideas, and at the universities of Edinburgh, Oxford, and Stirling, and the British Group of Early American Historians for patiently receiving papers on the topics discussed herein. Our special thanks to Sara Martin, Sara Georgini, and Christopher F. Minty of the Adams Family Papers. David Bebbington, Francis D. Cogliano, Edith B. Gelles, Jamie Macpherson, Meg McCall, Ben Marsh, and anonymous reviewers provided insightful readings of the book manuscript at various stages. The editorial and production teams at Routledge, Taylor and Francis deserve our sincere gratitude. Our families have been unfailingly supportive throughout. We hope that you will have as much joy reading this book as we have had in writing it.

—Colin Nicolson and Owen Dudley Edwards, 2018



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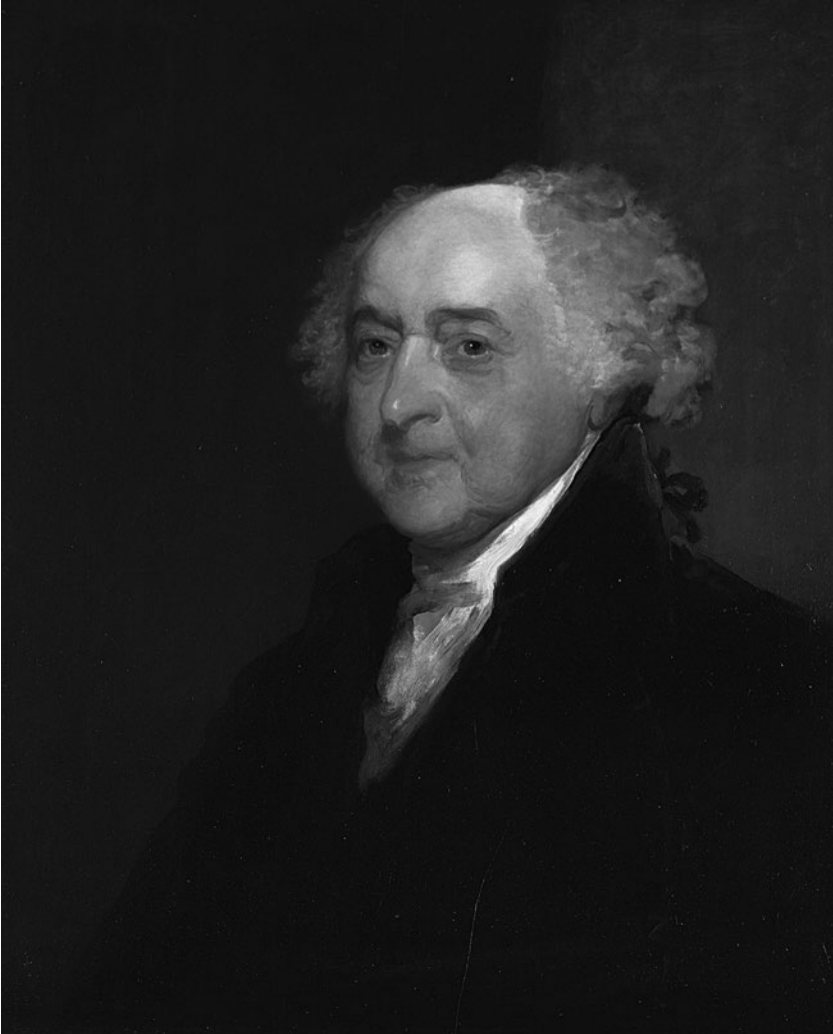


Figure 0.1 John Adams, circa 1815. Oil on canvas by Gilbert Stuart (American, 1755–1828).

Source: Gift of the estate of William Smith Shaw, 1826. Boston Athenæum.

Prologue

History

But what do we mean by the American Revolution? Do we mean the American War? The Revolution was effected before the War commenced. The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people. A change in their religious sentiments, of their duties and obligations.

—John Adams to Hezekiah Niles, Quincy, 13 February 1818

The Historian

John Adams's most famous words were written at home in a winter of contentment. The former president was laying the capstone to a distinguished if sometimes controversial public career. Handicapped by failing eyesight, palsy in his hands, and arthritis, the household was his immediate audience, posterity his last and greatest (see Figure 001). Nostalgia had not blinded Adams to his own shortcomings or responsibilities, and, aided by family scribes, he also spoke poignantly to rising generations. Americans' intellectual and emotional attachments to Great Britain, the letter to publisher Hezekiah Niles continued, were profoundly altered in the decade before the Declaration of Independence of 1776. "*This radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments and affections of the people, was the real American Revolution.*"¹

The "revolution-principles" Adams had espoused included restraint as well as impetus. Others more restrained or more impetuous than he advanced Liberty and Independence. Adams never forgot the deep divisions on the eve of the Revolutionary War when polemicists and generals competed for hearts and minds. When the fighting began, he counseled wife Abigail they should "prepare our Minds and Hearts for every Event, even the Worst," believing from the "Beginning that the Controversy was of such a Nature that it never would be settled." Only in the war's third year could he declare the Independence "Cause had sunk into the Minds and Hearts of the People.—In short every Thing I see and hear, indicates the same Thing."²

The phraseology is discordant to modern ears; the personalized exposition discomfiting to historians. Abigail preferred "hearts and minds,"

2 Prologue

John “minds” over “hearts.” Enlightenment rationalists like their friend Thomas Jefferson might have supposed John put reason before passion when explaining political motivation. What good would that have done? Jefferson once asked a confidante, “If our country, when pressed with wrongs at the point of the bayonet, had been governed by it’s heads instead of it’s hearts, where should we have been now? hanging on a gallows.” He likened “Head” and “Heart” to two old friends in dialogue, “Head” guiding sculpture of the Declaration’s preamble but harmony always implied.³ It was much the same for the octogenarian Adams when assaying the Revolution’s origins. Adams always intended that the people should become intellectuals and bring emotion to bear on intellectual endeavor, and schooled his eldest son John Quincy Adams to lead them there.⁴ He now set his own mind and heart on sustaining the American union through helping Americans write the history of their revolution. With its second war against Britain barely survived and still scarred by slavery, Americans must retain their “revolution-principles.” History would be their anchor.

To Jefferson Adams rehearsed the questions Hezekiah Niles made famous. “Who shall write the history of the American Revolution? Who can write it? Who will ever be able to write it?” Adams demanded. “Nobody; except merely it’s external facts,” Jefferson answered.⁵ The dull reply might have drawn a wry smile. Adams did not share Jefferson’s wonderment that contemporary Euro-American revolutions were progressively banishing “bigotry . . . ignorance and barbarism,” yet here was the herald of American independence shrugging off its history. “I like dreams of the future,” Jefferson later intimated, “better than the history of the past.”⁶ In Jefferson’s heart and mind the age of revolutions continued, whereas Adams was compelled to evaluate the American phase. Jefferson avoided writing history, awed by dramatic shifts in revolutionary Paris; Adams readily called history as a witness, unafraid of French or Haitian revolutions conquering North America. Both Founders wanted Americans to complete their own revolution by stabilizing government and fostering equality. By 1812, slavery, war, Bonapartist autocracy, and monarchical reaction made the American Revolution seem more important in its promises than its performances for humanity.⁷ Adams constructed his thesis that the “*real*” revolution ante-dated the Declaration with Jefferson in mind but feared its historical record was endangered unless he and other veterans left written testimony.⁸ Many debates in the Continental Congress were “secret” or unrecorded. Most revolutionary leaders were now deceased, taking stories with them, their private papers dispersed or destroyed. Adams felt obligated to become the historian to write and preserve the memories of that past.

The letter to Niles was one in a series of open letters published in *Niles’s Weekly Register* in 1818 scoping the “*real American Revolution*.” Substantive in content, intellectually robust, and didactic in purpose, they asked

whether a “true history of the American Revolution” could be written by future generations. Occasionally Adams hectored his correspondents, as he did Niles, but charmed, too, with anecdotes revealing his witness to history and how sometimes he was its maker. For readers, his enthusiasm proved inspiring. For himself, it was cathartic. For historians, it is puzzling.⁹

Adams’s epistle to Niles haunts historians, illuminating the ideological turn that impelled rebellion.¹⁰ But few realize that Adams himself seriously practiced the craft of history. Although ill equipped in political arts, Adams was devoted to political science and theory, for which he expected history to provide analogies and examples. His *magnum opus*, the three-volume *Defence of the Constitutions of the United States* (1787–88), is an annotated compendium of ancient and European constitutions devised for American constitution makers. Jefferson considered *Defence* “good sense” but lacking historical analysis.¹¹ In his retirement Adams struggled with historical detachment. His statesmanship conferred both authenticity and self-aggrandizement. His unfinished autobiography promised veracity while tarnished by petty one-upmanship and cantankerousness. His vanity was intrusive. In public letters, Adams reminded Americans of his Founding Fatherhood, uneasy with praise lavished on Jefferson alone for the Declaration.¹²

Adams expected the historiographical eclipse of his single-term administration (1797–1801). His friendship with Jefferson had been nearly obliterated by Jeffersonian libels, the most galling charging cryptomonarchism. Adams’s zeal to remain above partisanship was endangered by disgruntled Federalists undermining his presidency. Posterity, Adams fretted, might never appreciate how he kept the United States out of foreign wars or understand his fear of oligarchy in the turbulent “age of revolutions and constitutions.”¹³ John Adams, lonely president and grumpy old man, feared that history would forget him. It has not. But it has forgotten the kind of history that Adams wanted written.¹⁴

Thirty years after they had both signed the Declaration of Independence, Benjamin Rush told Adams to write the Revolution’s history. Rush shared some of Adams’s misgivings about current affairs, urging frank reminiscences to educate present generations. He envisioned a documentary-based history “written by a man who was the principal Actor in the events which he describes, and who lived in those times.” Rush might have cited exemplars familiar to Adams, notably Thucydides (ca. 460–ca. 400 BC) or Edward Hyde, first earl of Clarendon (1609–74). Adams objected that he required a “Volume” to answer Rush properly because of his “very Serious Ideas of the Duties of an Historian,” for “no History should be written but under the Oath of Thuanus.”¹⁵ “*Pro veritate historiarum mearum Deum ipsum obtestor*” (for the truth of historical matters, I cite God as my witness) was sworn by the “great martyr” to religious liberty, Jacques Auguste de Thou (1553–1617), whose *Historia Sui Temporis* (1604–09) won widespread praise for its impartiality on the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre of French Protestants (1572) and the

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Edict of Nantes (1598) reconciling Catholics and Protestants, which de Thou, a leading Catholic magistrate, helped to engineer.¹⁶

Thuanus's oath was Adams's benchmark for good history. "No man ought to commit any thing to writing as history, or as memorials to serve for history, without a strict regard to truth."¹⁷ In extolling veracity Adams identified historical truth with impartiality and morality in the civic humanist tradition. Good history required verifiable facts found in documentary evidence. Good historians required patience and objectivity in interpreting these facts. Authenticity Adams generally equated with intellectual rigor, but for historians writing about events in their own lifetime—witness historians—he considered actual participation in or personal observation of these events an additional prerequisite. Adams was not ready to write such a history, he told Rush. His personal papers were disorganized, and for some "facts" he was the sole surviving witness. Nor could he tolerate the "Jealousy and Envy" of surviving friends about whom he must write (including his sincere friend Rush). Of his own place in history, he professed unconvincingly, he would rather let others decide.¹⁸

Adams had little to say about Revolution historians for they had little to say about him. One old friend "concur[ed]" with Adams's "opinion" that the early histories were "not popular" because they were written by "little known" authors lacking "*personal* knowledge of the facts they related,"¹⁹ such as William Gordon, an English-born Presbyterian minister returned to London. Washington's biographer Chief Justice John Marshall and South Carolina physician David Ramsay produced hack work, Adams opined,²⁰ preferring British historians and "fashionable reading" like Clarendon.²¹ Readers "should expect to find more Truth in a History written by [Thomas] Hutchinson, [Peter] Oliver or [Jonathan] Sewell,"—prominent Loyalists—than by Gordon and his peers.²² Hutchinson, although an enemy, had written history from his governor's standpoint, more institutionally than politically, and its erudition and otherwise perishable documentation demanded Adams's respect and occasional (if usually silent) admiration.²³ Hutchinson he recommended to Europeans inquisitive about writing a history of the American Revolution, along with the political writings of James Otis, Jonathan Sewall, Jonathan Mayhew, and others he considered indispensable.²⁴

John Adams was not the only Massachusetts Patriot capable of writing such history. Yet he failed in respect to the best. In 1807, Adams's insecurities surfaced in an ugly tirade against Mercy Otis Warren, once a close friend to Abigail's. Whilst applauding Adams's personal integrity, Warren had suggested his "prejudices and his passions were sometimes too strong for his sagacity and judgment." Her hardest blow accorded with Jeffersonian propaganda: that in Europe, Adams had "forgotten the principles of the American revolution" and developed a "partiality for monarchy." Her attack was probably political. Adams cruelly disparaged the seventy-nine-year-old Warren's lack of political experience.²⁵ (The