

Tales of Two Adamses

Samuel and John

King George III once said, "I have heard of one Mr. Adams but who is the other?" The king had heard much about Samuel Adams, the ringleader of colonial rebellion. He could never have dreamed that he would meet the "other," John Adams, face to face, as the first diplomatic representative from the United States of America to Great Britain!

Samuel and John Adams were second cousins, born in Massachusetts and graduates of Harvard University. They served together on the Continental Congress and signed the *Declaration of Independence*. Each was on the ballot in the 1796 presidential election. Yet, for all they had in common, they were very different men.

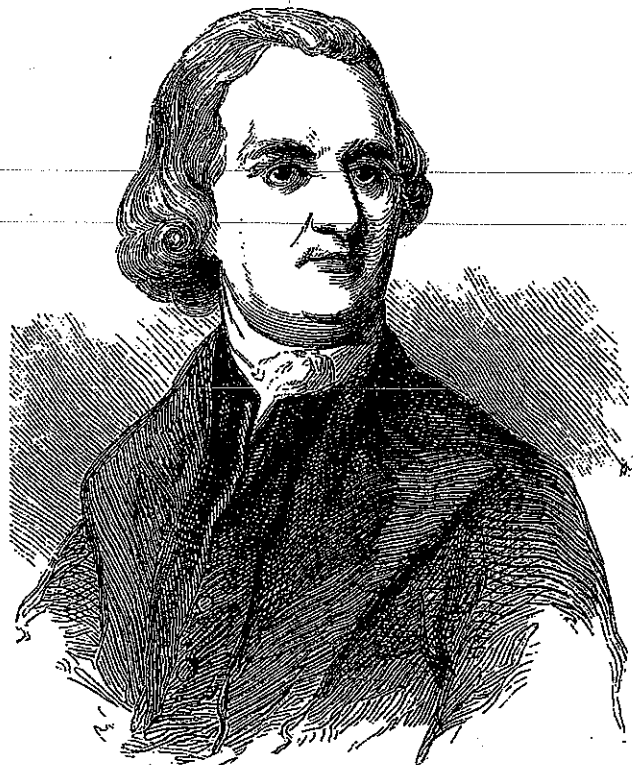
Samuel Adams – Political Father

Samuel Adams was born in 1722, thirteen years before John, in the bustling capital of Massachusetts Bay. Though modern writers refer to him as Sam, he was known to family and friends as Samuel. Only people who thought ill of him would call him Sam. He was called other names, too, among them "the grand incendiary" (fire starter) and "the most dangerous man in Massachusetts."

Samuel's father, Deacon Adams, owned a malt business and possessed modest wealth. He was a member of the Boston town meeting, and the Adams house was filled with visitors and talk about issues affecting the people of Boston.

Even as a boy, Samuel found politics interesting and exciting. He came to recognize Boston's leading merchants and tradesmen. He listened and learned how government worked. He came to believe many problems were caused by the royal governor, or a far-off king and Parliament.

Samuel entered Harvard University when he was thirteen years old. (John Adams was fifteen when he went, ages not unusual for the time.) Samuel earned a masters degree when he was twenty-one and seemed destined for success. His proud father got him a job as a clerk in a countinghouse (like a modern bank), but things didn't turn out as hoped.



Samuel Adams

On his lunch hour, Samuel would eat at nearby taverns and talk politics with other patrons. He got caught up in discussions about how the people of Massachusetts should have more power to govern themselves. He was frequently late getting back to work and when he returned, he could not concentrate on the accounts. The job did not last long.

His worried father scraped together one thousand pounds and told Samuel to start any sort of business he wished. Samuel immediately gave half the money to a friend in financial trouble who lost it. The rest of the money disappeared soon after. In desperation, Deacon Adams then hired Samuel for his malt works.

When the elder Adams died in 1748, Samuel inherited the house and business. The next year, he married and soon had a family to support, but he never made much money. People would recognize Samuel as he walked the streets of Boston by his red, threadbare coat. At times, he was so poor that, if not for gifts from friends, his family might have starved.

However, Samuel Adams was very good at politics. He wrote, he spoke, and he became a master planner, organizer, and persuader. In the Massachusetts Legislature, he fought against laws through which the British Parliament tried to raise money from the colonies. Over the years he wrote hundreds of articles using (according to John Adams) one hundred pen names. He helped elect useful men to office. He founded many groups, including the Sons of Liberty.



John Adams

From the start, Samuel sought more than the rights of Americans. His vision was independence from England. His aim was revolution and he was prepared to do whatever it took to make it happen. Samuel was happy when England imposed new taxes and stationed troops in Boston because he'd have fresh fuel to stir up the people. He helped start riots and spread stories of

British abuses (some true and some not true) throughout Massachusetts and to the other colonies.

Samuel played his role behind the scenes. He let others take credit, and the more people he got involved, the happier he was. He recognized promising young men who could be useful to the cause. He helped educate and motivate great patriots, including John Hancock, Paul Revere, and John Adams, who called his cousin his "political father."

John Adams – Man of Reason

John Adams was born on a farm in the village of Braintree, Mass., in 1735. He loved the quiet and beauty of country life so much, he once wanted nothing more than to be a farmer. His father persuaded him to pursue his education, and John found he loved books and learning. He proved to have a brilliant mind and passionately wanted to do something great with his life — and to be remembered for it. After graduating from Harvard, he considered becoming a minister, then a teacher. In 1759 he became a lawyer.

Though naturally shy, John discovered he enjoyed being the focus of attention in the courtroom. He worked very hard and his honesty, integrity, and his legal skill earned him a reputation beyond Braintree. He began to come to Boston regularly on legal business.

It wasn't until this time, when John was in his thirties, that he and his cousin Samuel got to know each other. They walked and talked much in Boston. Once they explored a cave together, and on another occasion, Samuel took John's seven-year-old son, John Quincy, to watch the British drill on Boston Common.

Samuel learned John's great strengths were his intelligence and reason. John had no equal in debate. Though a staunch defender of American rights, he was less rebellious than Samuel. He weighed things carefully before making big decisions, but once he chose his course, nothing could stop him. Because of these qualities, Samuel knew John was the best man to promote the case for independence to other colonial leaders. He worked to convert him to the cause.

In 1765 John was first chosen for public office. It was the year of the *Stamp Act*, an attempt by the British

Discussion or Essay Questions

Do you enjoy working behind the scenes on a project that you really care about, like Samuel Adams, or is it important for you to be recognized for your work, like John Adams? How did these different character traits affect the journey toward independence? How do people with very different character traits work successfully together today?

Group Activity: Samuel Adams believed that stirring up trouble, even breaking the law, was justified in the pursuit of the great cause. John Adams believed in the law and reason. Form two teams and debate which approach is best.



Want to Read More?

Ages 9-12

John Adams: Young Revolutionary (F) by Jan Adkins

John Adams: Independence Forever by Janet and Geoff Benge

Why Don't You Get a Horse, Sam Adams? by Jean Fritz

Ages 12+

The Writings of Samuel Adams by Samuel Adams

Samuel Adams: Son of Liberty, Father of Revolution by Benjamin Irvin

John Adams by David McCullough



Parliament to directly tax Americans. Angry citizens damaged homes of government officials in Boston, and John was horrified. He described the mob action as an "atrocious violation of the peace."

John's response was to publish a political essay in the *Boston Gazette* stating his belief that American freedoms were rights that had been long established by British law. His words had great impact and inspired him to write more.

In March 1770 Boston citizens instigated a street fight with British soldiers that turned deadly. Five colonials were killed. Samuel Adams and Paul Revere transformed the incident into the Boston Massacre and spread the news far and wide. The people were demanding the blood of the eight soldiers who had fired into the crowd. Samuel asked John and Josiah Quincy, another leading lawyer, to defend the men in court in order to show the other colonies that Bostonians valued justice above all.

John knew taking the case would make him very unpopular, but his belief that every man deserved a fair trial overcame his fears. The defense was so brilliant that not a single man hanged. Two were convicted of manslaughter and six were declared not guilty.

John Adams loved the law and loathed violence and destruction, while Samuel Adams encouraged it as necessary to achieve a greater purpose, but both Adamses shared courage and a fierce loyalty to the land of their birth. John might have spoken for Samuel as well when he declared to congress on the eve of the *Declaration of Independence*, "All that I have, all that I am, all that I hope for in this life, I stake on our cause. For me the die is cast. Sink or swim, live or die, to survive or perish with my country . . .!"



About the author

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