

JOHN ADAMS:

“Survive or Perish with My Country”

John Adams

TWO SIGNERS WENT ON TO BECOME PRESIDENT of the new nation. The first was John Adams of Massachusetts.



Born in Braintree (today Quincy), near Boston, in 1735, John graduated from Harvard, then taught school for a year. Although he later claimed that he learned all that he needed to know about human nature from his students, he was not very fond of teaching, so he turned to the study of law. Just after he became an attorney, he met Abigail Smith. He and “Miss Adorable,” as he called her, were married in 1764. The couple had five children and enjoyed a lifelong love affair that ended only with her death after fifty-four years of marriage. The many letters John and Abigail Adams exchanged when apart provide us with a vivid picture of revolutionary times.

Like many other young men, John was led to the patriot cause by his cousin Samuel Adams. In 1770 John was elected to the Massachusetts legislature, where he and Samuel spearheaded the fight against English oppression. John served in the Continental Congress from 1774 to 1777. One of the hardest-working congressmen, he awoke at four each morning and kept going until ten at night. By 1775 he believed that America must become independent. “The die is now cast,” he wrote in a letter. “Sink or swim, live or die, survive or perish with my country is my unalterable determination.”

Thanks partly to John’s efforts, the new nation survived. In Congress, he and his cousin were instrumental in appointing George Washington to command the Continental Army. As a member of the committee assigned to draft the Declaration, he convinced Thomas Jefferson to do the writing. Years later, Adams described his discussion with Jefferson about it:

TJ: "You should do it!"

JA: "Oh! No."

TJ: "Why will you not? You ought to do it."

JA: "I will not."

TJ: "Why?"

JA: "Reasons enough."

TJ: "What can be your reasons?"

JA: "Reason first—you are a Virginian, and a Virginian ought to appear at the head of this business. Reason second—I am obnoxious, suspected, and unpopular. You are very much otherwise. Reason third—you can write ten times better than I can."

TJ: "Well, if you are decided, I will do as well as I can."



John Adams and Benjamin Franklin made a few minor changes in Jefferson's stirring document that called a new nation to arms. John Adams put his "John Hancock" on the Declaration right below his cousin Samuel's signature.

Early in 1778, Congress sent John Adams to obtain help for America in France. John and Abigail decided that their ten-year-old son, John Quincy Adams, should go, too. John and John Quincy Adams were at sea when their ship engaged in a battle with a British vessel. John grabbed his musket and went out on deck with his young son. Suddenly a cannonball slammed into the ship near where the father and son were standing. Had it struck a few feet away, it might have killed two future U.S. presidents.

Following the Revolution, John Adams helped negotiate the peace treaty. He later served his country in many ways. In the first election for president in 1789, George Washington received the most votes; John Adams came in second. By the method then used, Washington became president and Adams vice president. Then in 1796 John Adams was elected as the nation's second president. He held the office from 1797 until 1801.

Abigail didn't live long enough to see it, but John Adams was still alive when his son John Quincy Adams took office as the nation's sixth president in 1825. Until George and George W. Bush, John and John Quincy Adams were the only father and son to both hold the nation's highest office.

John Adams remained vigorous until his late eighties, walking three miles a day. By a remarkable coincidence, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson died on the same day—July 4, 1826, precisely fifty years after the adoption of the Declaration of Independence. The last words uttered by the ninety-year-old John Adams were, "Thomas Jefferson still survives," but unknown to Adams, the author of the Declaration of Independence had died a few hours earlier.