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Gregg L. Lint
Massachusetts Historical Society

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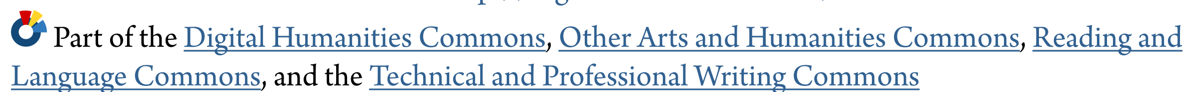
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John Adams: On Paper and in Person

GREGG L. LINT

In 1774 John Adams was a thirty-nine-year-old Massachusetts lawyer of modest means, middling height, and portly physique, who was ambitious, argumentative, over-earnest, direct to the point of rudeness, and intolerant of fools. How did this man, seemingly unsympathetic and ordinary when compared to George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin, become by 1776 Congress's most influential member? Why was he named president of the Board of War and appointed to the committees that drafted the Treaty Plan of 1776 and the Declaration of Independence? Why was he then chosen to serve as a diplomat in Europe and later elected vice president and president of the United States? What was it about John Adams that inspired confidence and led people to place the fate of the new nation in his hands? These questions have never been adequately answered by John Adams's many biographers, largely because Adams emerged as a major historical figure through his interaction with other people, the most thorough record of which is his own correspondence. But Adams's character cannot be determined solely by reference to his papers and may, in fact, be unknowable. For editors and biographers there are really two men to be considered, both of them named John Adams.

The first John Adams, whom I know far better than the second, is the product of his writings: the thousands of letters, the published pamphlets and newspaper pieces, the diary, and other documents that he produced and preserved, at least in part, so that someone might later write an accurate account of the momentous times in which he lived. But this John Adams is a paper person, the product of his own writings and what others wrote about him. He is the creature of the available documentation, and this is all that we shall ever know unless the séance becomes an accepted tool of documentary editing.

By most measures John Adams tells us a great deal about his life, public and private, and seemingly leaves few gaps in the historical record. His papers show a man of intellect, perhaps the most learned American lawyer of his time. It was he who set down the ideological foundations for the American Revolution and, with the possible exception of James Madison, gave more thought to the nature of government than any other American. He was a committed revolutionary and from the beginning, unlike many of his Massachusetts friends, a strong nationalist. He was a voracious reader whose varied taste ran from Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa Harlowe* to Jean Dumont's *Corps universel diplomatique*. He was an activist diplomat, an unflinching, fervent advocate for the vital interests of the United States and probably more conversant than any other American with the history and practice of European diplomacy.

His papers also reveal a private man in contrast to the public, although the two can never be wholly separated. His letters to Abigail, beginning with their courtship, show an enduring and loving relationship that was valued by both for the qualities that each brought to it. The letters reveal a man aware of his vanity and sensitivity to criticism, with doubts as to his own motives and outlook. They show him amused at teaching Samuel Adams to ride a horse, concerned over the education of his sons, alarmed over the courtship of his daughter, fonder of Paris than Amsterdam, and at sea over the mechanics of procuring a house in Amsterdam. Even Adams's handwriting is expressive and often indicative of his mood.

Then there are his opinions on virtually every person or event that passed before him that, wisely or unwisely, he committed to paper. John Dickinson was the "piddling Genius."[1] Joseph Galloway was notable because "A meaner, falser, heart, never circulated Blood."[2] The Comte de Vergennes wrote "Snarling," and "Growling" letters.[3] Depending on Adams's mood, Benjamin Franklin was "your excellency," the "so-called philosopher," or the "old conjurer." The Dutch were "Idolaters at the Shrine of Mammon" and, possibly because so many of them lived there, Amsterdam was the "Capital of the Reign of Mammon."[4] The American Revolution was the "greatest . . . that ever took Place among Men," for it was "*the Peoples War.*"[5] Britain prosecuted the war with America because "To Tyrants, Tyranny is always very dear."[6] This makes John Adams very quotable and seemingly more accessible

GREGG L. LINT is the senior associate editor of the Adams Papers and editor of the *Papers of John Adams*. He presented this paper at the 1997 annual meeting of the Association for Documentary Editing in Boston, Massachusetts.

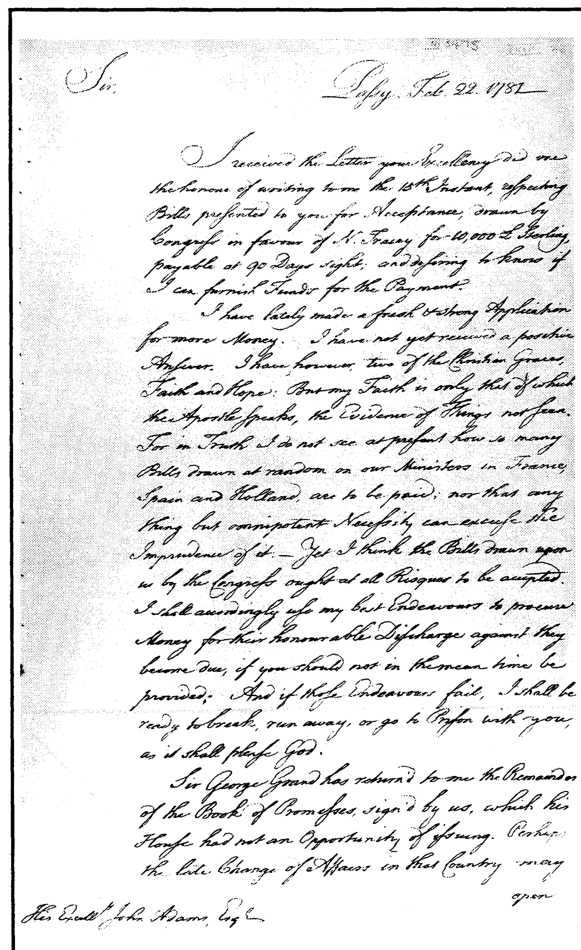
than many of the founding fathers, since he exhibits the full range of human emotions. It should be kept in mind, however, that an apt description or a well-turned phrase does not necessarily equal full disclosure.

The second John Adams is the man that I would like to know better, but can never know completely. He is a man of the eighteenth century, a time when the laws of nature were evident to any right-thinking individual, the law of nations was slowly developing into international law, and mankind was steadily leaving behind the barbarism of the past. He is the one who walked the streets of Boston and Braintree, courted and married Abigail Smith, crossed the Atlantic on a leaky French frigate, and breathed the air of Paris, Amsterdam, and London. This John Adams lived a real life in a real world that with its wars and revolutions must have seemed to be moving at breakneck speed. It was a world where he heard, observed, read, and understood far more than he could ever put down on paper. But I can know only an approximation of that life, for I have only his papers. I will never hear John Adams's voice or be able to interview him about his life, the people he knew, or the events he witnessed and participated in. He will never be able to explain inconsistencies or fill in gaps, real or imagined.

All editors face this duality, but too often the life depicted in the papers becomes more real than the life actually lived by the person who produced the papers. This is particularly true in the case of John Adams, where the amount of material left behind makes it possible to document his life almost day to day, and his papers sometimes constitute virtually the only account of a significant event, such as the First Continental Congress. Editors must keep all of this in mind and keep always in mind the life beyond the papers, for if they do not, the resulting documentary edition will fail to capture the world in which the documents were written and that determines the content.

Turning to the years 1780 and 1781 with this in mind, it is worth considering several questions about the papers of John Adams. What does Adams tell us about his life? What does he consciously or unconsciously leave out? How does the nature of the documentary record limit our ability to know John Adams? Finally, what should we know and take into account, irrespective of the documentary record, about the life of John Adams?

It is sometimes difficult to believe that John Adams left anything unsaid or any question unanswered. Indeed, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and George Washington can seem inarticulate and uninformative when compared to Adams. He called 1780—and 1781 was not a banner year either—the "most anxious and mortifying year" of his life because little that he attempted turned out to his satisfaction.[7] This was not, however, for lack of effort. In 1780 John Adams sent or received almost one thousand letters, a large number, but about average for Adams in the early 1780s. In 1781 this number dropped to about six hundred, but only because he was sick for three months. He supplemented all of this with his diary and multiple autobiographies to correct or improve the record. The sheer mass of these papers can


Sir, Passy. Feb. 22. 1781

I received the Letter your Excellency did me the honour of writing to me the 15th Instant, respecting Bills presented to you for Acceptance, drawn by Congress in favour of N. Tracey for 10,000 £ Sterling, payable at 90 Days sight; and desiring to know if I can furnish Funds for the Payment.

I have lately made a fresh & strong Application for more Money. I have not yet receiv'd a positive Answer. I have however two of the Christian Graces, Faith and Hope: But my Faith is only that of which the Apostle speaks, the Evidence of Things not seen. For in Truth I do not see at present how so many Bills drawn at random on our Ministers in France, Spain and Holland, are to be paid; nor that any thing but omnipotent Necessity can excuse the Imprudence of it.— Yet I think the Bills drawn upon us by the Congress ought at all Risques to be accepted. I shall accordingly use my best Endeavours to procure Money for their honourable Discharge against they become due, if you should not in the mean time be provided; And if those Endeavours fail, I shall be ready to break, run away, or go to Prison with you, as it shall please God.

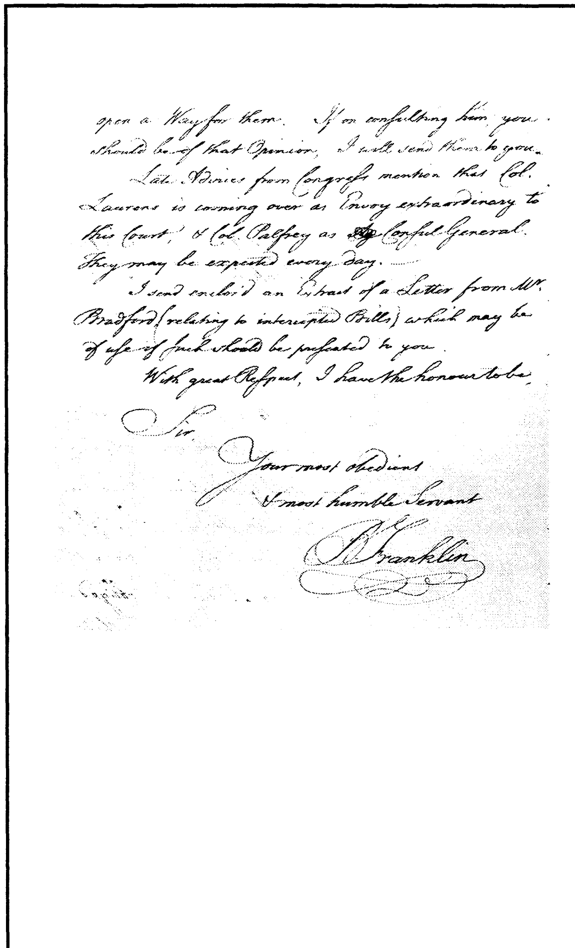
Sir George Grand has return'd to me the Remainder of the Book of Promesses, sign'd by us, which his House had not an Opportunity of issuing. Perhaps the late Change of Affairs in that Country may open

His Excell.y John Adams, Esq.

sometimes be overwhelming, but the editor is rewarded with letters that are rarely dull and are often marked by passion and candor.

The amount of documentation John Adams left behind looms large in any discussion or examination of his life and can lead to the illusion that we know far more about him than we do. But did John Adams tell us everything that we need or want to know in 1780 or any other year? The answer is, of course, a resounding no. No one ever does, and the reason they do not is the nature of the written word, particularly with regard to

correspondence. Letters are written for specific purposes: to inform, to request information, to ask a favor, or for a host of other reasons. The letters of John Adams are no different. They are generally clear and understandable at the first reading, but they are intended for Adams's contemporaries and assume that his readers are intelligent and need not be informed of what they already know. Adams's letters are definitely not stream-of-consciousness accounts intended to provide the twentieth-century reader with a slice of eighteenth-century life.



open a Way for them. If on consulting him you should be of that Opinion, I will send them to you.

Late Advices from Congress mention that Col. Laurens is coming over as Envoy extraordinary to this Court, & Col. Palfrey as Consul General. They may be expected every day.

I send enclos'd an Extract of a Letter from Mr. Bradford (relating to intercepted Bills) which may be of use if such should be presented to you.

With great Respect, I have the honour to be,

Sir,

Your most obedient
& most humble Servant

B Franklin

Benjamin Franklin to John Adams, 22 February 1781. The Adams Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

It follows, then, that correspondence is not the moral equivalent of speech. People write in letters what they would never say in conversation and say in conversation what they would never put down on paper. This was as true of John Adams as anyone else, although his parameters were far wider than some others'.Benjamin Franklin's papers, for example, reflect very clearly Adams's observation that Franklin "hates to offend, and seldom gives any Opinion until forced."[8] Moreover, letters are assumed to be private and thus, while they inform and explain, they also serve as outlets for doubt, euphoria, anger, frustration, and despair. The problems inherent in assuming that what is written on paper actually occurred in real life are evident from the following encounter:

> John Adams enters the drawing room at Passy and angrily confronts his aged, gout-ridden colleague, declaring, "Franklin, you old conjurer, your French is terrible and you are no more a philosopher than I am. This is the last time that you are going to double-cross me and sell out America to that worm Vergennes."
>
> Franklin pulls himself painfully to his feet and in an equally angry voice declares, "Adams, you may be honest, but you are absolutely out of your mind and I am not going to take any more of your Francophobic nonsense."
>
> The two men then come to blows, until separated by their trusty secretaries John Thaxter and William Temple Franklin.

This confrontation is based on passages from the letters of both men, but it never, in whole or in part, took place because it would have been unseemly for Adams, twenty-nine years younger than Franklin, to have spoken that way to his elder. If he had done so the two men could never have communicated, much less worked together again. But such comments, appearing in letters, have proved irresistible to historians and have served to define a relationship wherein the spectacular triumphs over the substantive. Little room is left to explain their apparent harmony during their joint residence at Passy or the dinner in 1784 where Adams and Franklin chatted happily at the head of the table with Madame Helvetius and Abigail Adams called Franklin the "good Doctor."[9]

If by its very nature correspondence conspires to prevent us from knowing everything, what then did John Adams, himself, consciously or unconsciously choose to leave out? His most glaring omission results from the failure to provide virtually any description of his environment. One will look in vain for detailed descriptions of Passy, Paris, Auteuil, Amsterdam, Leyden, or London, all places where he lived for considerable periods. John Adams resided at the Hotel de Valois on the Rue de Richelieu in Paris for six months in 1780 and returned there in later years, but all that we know about it from his

letters is the address. We only find out what the accommodations were like from passages in John Quincy Adams's diary written in 1815.[10] The accounts of his travels, whether in his diary or his letters, are usually brief passages noting that he started at one point and arrived at another. If it were not for John Quincy Adams's diary we would know far less than we do about the voyage to Europe in 1779, the trip through Spain to Paris, or the journey from Paris to Amsterdam in the summer of 1780.[11] This contrast between the papers of John and John Quincy Adams shows a generational difference in what was seen as important enough to record, but it also shows very clearly some of the limitations that the papers of John Adams impose on our ability to know fully the world in which he lived.

John Adams's reticence extends beyond his physical environment to those who peopled it. Whom did John Adams talk to and how did he spend his time when not working? It may be understandable, although regrettable, that he did not record his conversations with servants or others who were outside the realm of his official duties, but what of those with Benjamin Franklin or Francis Dana? Adams and Franklin lived together at Passy for almost a year and collaborated closely as two of the three American commissioners. They knew each other very, very well and yet virtually nothing is known, from the writings of either man, of how they worked together or what they talked about during their daily encounters. What did they say to each other at breakfast, lunch, or dinner? What was the nature of their discussions about Arthur Lee, a man both found impossible to work with? What did they have to say about the progress of the war, Great Britain, the prospects for peace, or a host of other matters that must have concerned both men? Were their discussions of the French alliance and the course of Franco-American relations heated and adversarial or simple conversations?

Of equal significance is Adams's reticence with regard to the thought process by which he came to make his decisions and pursue the policies proceeding therefrom. Little controversy has resulted from this for the period prior to the opening of his diplomatic career. Certainly few would describe Adams's *Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law*, Novanglus essays, *Thoughts on Government*, or the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780 as ill considered, or his defense of the British soldiers at the Boston Massacre trial or support for American independence as a member of the Continental Congress as impulsive. And yet, with no more information upon which to base such judgments, historians have characterized John Adams's actions as a diplomat as impulsive, ill considered, and even paranoid. In the spring and early summer of 1780, for example, John Adams launched a peace offensive in the London newspapers and, at virtually the same time, entered into a series of confrontations with the Comte de Vergennes over the revaluation of American currency and the nature and sufficiency of French aid. There can be little doubt that the two efforts were connected in Adams's mind, but there is no written evidence that such was the case. Did he really think that peace was possible in 1780? Was he then prepared to sign a separate peace and abandon the Franco-American Alliance? Adams was equally silent about his efforts in the Netherlands. Which Amsterdam bankers did John Adams approach for advice and a loan in 1780, and what was the nature of his negotiations with the firm of Jean de Neufville and Son for a loan in 1781? Did Adams really believe in 1780 and 1781 that he could single-handedly persuade the Dutch to recognize the United States and sign a Dutch-American commercial treaty? Whom did he consult in that regard and also with reference to his memorial to the States General of 19 April 1781?

Editors must accept the fact that the documents are not going to tell them everything they want to know. Documents that do not exist cannot be edited or explained. This does not mean, however, that common sense can be abandoned for the illusion that something not recorded never happened or was unknown to the author of the papers in question. This trap for the unwary was sprung at a recent conference on John Adams. A commentator noted that the principal issue in European diplomacy in the early 1780s was Russian expansionism. He declared that since neither John Adams nor Benjamin Franklin mentioned the dangers of Russian expansionism in their writings they were ill-informed amateur diplomats. The commentator's facts were correct: I have found no mention by Adams of Russian expansionism, and I assume that Franklin's papers are also silent on the subject. But their silence proves only that neither man wrote anything down about a subject thought important by a commentator in the late twentieth century. It also assumes that Adams and Franklin talked to no one on their visits to Versailles, read no newspapers, or had any other sources of information.

This episode points out the too frequent assumption that the papers of a person represent a closed universe and that the real world in which John Adams and his contemporaries lived can be ignored. John Adams read every British, Dutch, and French newspaper that he could get his hands on and often recorded their reports on the

progress of the war or other events relating to his mission. But he did not record other things of which he must have read, such as the duel fought by the Earl of Shelburne and William Fullerton in 1780, the Donellan murder case of 1781, the events at the British, French, and Dutch courts, and a whole host of other things that were going on around him. Neither does he say anything about how he spent his days. What was involved in traveling between Amsterdam and Leyden or Leyden and The Hague? What was the Arms of Amsterdam or the Parliament of England (the inn where he stayed at The Hague) like? What did he eat and how often did he eat out in company? What was said at the gathering of "a chosen few of honest Americans" at the "Golden Lyon" at Leyden to which Adams invited François Adriaan van der Kemp on 17 April 1781?[12]

There also are some things that, although not stated or appearing in any written source, should be obvious or are made significant by their omission. A substantive conflict did exist between John Adams and Benjamin Franklin, but might a great deal of it be laid to the desperation of these two men deeply committed to the success of the American Revolution? An American defeat meant absolute catastrophe for them. John Adams would most likely never have returned to Massachusetts and Franklin would have died in Paris rather than his beloved Philadelphia. The stakes involved in their respective missions were so astronomical that it is no wonder that two such strong-willed men would believe their chosen paths to the promised land to be correct and that each would believe the other was misguided when the two paths diverged. With this in mind, it should be noted that nowhere in the papers of John Adams is there a single passage expressing doubt about the ultimate victory of the United States in its war with Britain, and my less exhaustive examination of Franklin's papers shows much the same. Here the absence of information tells us as much about the two men as a thousand letters.

What are the implications of all this for the documentary editor and those who would use the documents? Editors are by definition more limited than biographers because they must deal with what is before them, what has been left them by their subject. But documents do not necessarily speak for themselves, and editors have an obligation to place the documents within the context of the life of a real human being. With annotation the editor can fill in gaps and indicate what is not there, but which should be considered by those using the documents. Biographers should go further and seek to depict a real person functioning in a real world. Keep in mind that a biography of John Adams in his own words is not the equivalent of *cinema vérité,* for he left so much of that real world out. Biographers, like editors, must consult the documents and use common sense and ask whether the person they are dealing with is acting the part of a real person or is only a creature of the documents, a paper person of great breadth, but no depth.

Notes

1. To James Warren, 24 July, *Papers of John Adams*, ed. Robert J. Taylor, Gregg L. Lint and others (Cambridge, 1977–), 3:89–92. Hereafter referred to as JA, *Papers*.

2. To Edmund Jenings, 18 July 1780, JA, *Papers*, 10:8–11.

3. These comments formed part of an index entry in John Adams's Letterbook No. 11, for which see JA, *Papers*, 9:xii–xiii, 454.

4. To James Warren, 9 Dec. 1780; to William Temple Franklin, 7 Dec. 1780; JA, *Papers*, 10:404–406, 398.

5. To Thomas Digges, 13 May 1780; to Hendrik Calkoen, No. 6, 10 Oct. 1780; JA, *Papers*, 9:307–309; 10:216–220.

6. To Edmund Jenings, 23 Oct. 1780, JA, *Papers*, 10:300–301.

7. To the president of Congress, 31 Dec. 1780, JA, *Papers*, 10:465–466.

8. To Samuel Adams, 7 Dec. 1778, JA, *Papers*, 7:255–259.

9. Abigail Adams to Lucy Cranch, 5 Sept. 1784, *Adams Family Correspondence*, ed. L. H. Butterfield and others (Cambridge, 1963–), 5: 436–439.

10. John Quincy Adams, Diary, 5 and 12 Feb. 1815, quoted in JA, *Papers*, 9:xi.

11. *Diary of John Quincy Adams*, ed. David Grayson Allen, Robert J. Taylor and others (Cambridge, 1981–) , 1:1–52.

12. To Francis Adriaan van der Kemp, 17 April 1781, Pennsylvania Historical Society, John Adams Papers.

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