

Declaration of Independence - Signers Series

John Adams - Massachusetts

Our second president was born on October 30, 1735, the eldest son of Deacon John Adams and Susanna Boylston in Braintree, now, Quincy, Massachusetts. After going to Braintree Latin School, he went to Harvard, graduating in 1755. Like many men of his time, he was encouraged to become a minister. However, after teaching grammar school for three years in Worcester, he chose law as his career, practicing first in Braintree and then Boston.

Very quickly, his legal career grew, and he soon became a well-known member of the resistance movement that questioned Parliament's right to tax the American Colonies. In 1765, he wrote "A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law," which justified opposition to the Stamp Act. He claimed that this act "exposed the inherently coercive and corrupt character of English politics." By 1767, he became a leading opponent of the Townshend Acts, which imposed duties on imported glass, lead, paper, paint, and tea.

Surprisingly, perhaps, was the position that Adams took when he agreed to defend the British soldiers who had fired on the Boston citizens, in what was known as the Boston Massacre in 1770. This was due to his insistence that the legal rights of the soldier should be upheld, particularly, since they had been provoked. Seven of the nine defendants were acquitted. This was vintage John Adams, doing what he deemed was right, whether it was the popular action or not.

By 1774, Adams actions in opposition to the Boston Ports Bill, and the other "Intolerable Acts", made him obnoxious to Royal Governor Gage, who was essentially a military governor. But his fellow patriots elected him as one of the delegates to the First Continental Congress in September of that year. He and his cousin Samuel Adams quickly became the leaders of the radical faction that rejected reconciliation with the British. His "Novanglus" essays of early 1775 insisted that Parliament did not have the authority not just to tax the colonies, but to legislate for the colonies in any way. The year earlier, Thomas Jefferson had posed a similar argument.



John Adams

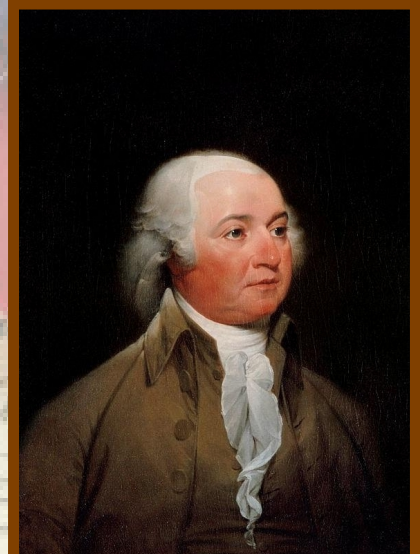
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During the Second Continental Congress, Adams gained the reputation as the "Atlas of Independence." Although he strongly suggested the gentleman from Virginia should be the Commander-in Chief of the new Continental Army, it was Thomas Johnson of Maryland who nominated George Washington for that position. It was Adams who selected Thomas Jefferson to write the Declaration of Independence, and who dominated the debate to obtain unanimous support for it. Adams wanted to unite the colonies, rather than just have the leaders of the revolution be from Massachusetts.

Adams' "Thoughts on Government" became a template for drafting new state constitutions. This would later lead his being called to create a constitution for Massachusetts. His Plan of Treaties in July of 1776 served as the framework for a treaty with France, and identified priorities that would shape American foreign policy for the next century.

Soon thereafter, he became the head of the Board of War and Ordinance, a one-man war department to raise and equip the Continental Army, and to create the American Navy from scratch. Then, it was on to negotiations in Paris with Benjamin Franklin, and later to achieving favorable terms in the Peace of Paris in 1783, which officially ended the American Revolution. Soon thereafter, he was made the minister to the Court of James in England, followed by negotiating a \$400,000 loan from Dutch bankers to settle the government's European debts.



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When he returned to America in 1788, he was placed on the ballot with Washington as Vice President, a position he would later claim as "the most insignificant office that ever the Invention of man contrived or his Imagination conceived." His main job proved to be breaking tie votes in the Senate, of which there were 31 plus, the most by any Vice President in history.

In 1796, he won the Presidency by 3 electoral votes over Jefferson, who became his Vice President, and who he tried to bring into the cabinet. Jefferson, of the opposing party, declined in order to maintain his independence. Four years later, Adams, the first President to inhabit the presidential mansion, lost to Jefferson, and was the first president not to attend the inauguration of his successor.

By 1812, he initiated a correspondence with Jefferson, which would last for their remaining years. And, in 1826, he had the pleasure of seeing his son, John Quincy Adams become our sixth president. But on July 4, 1826, 50 years after the passage of the Declaration of Independence, both Jefferson and Adams would pass, with Adams' last words being, "Independence for ever." Thus, there was but one signer left, Charles Carroll of Maryland.

