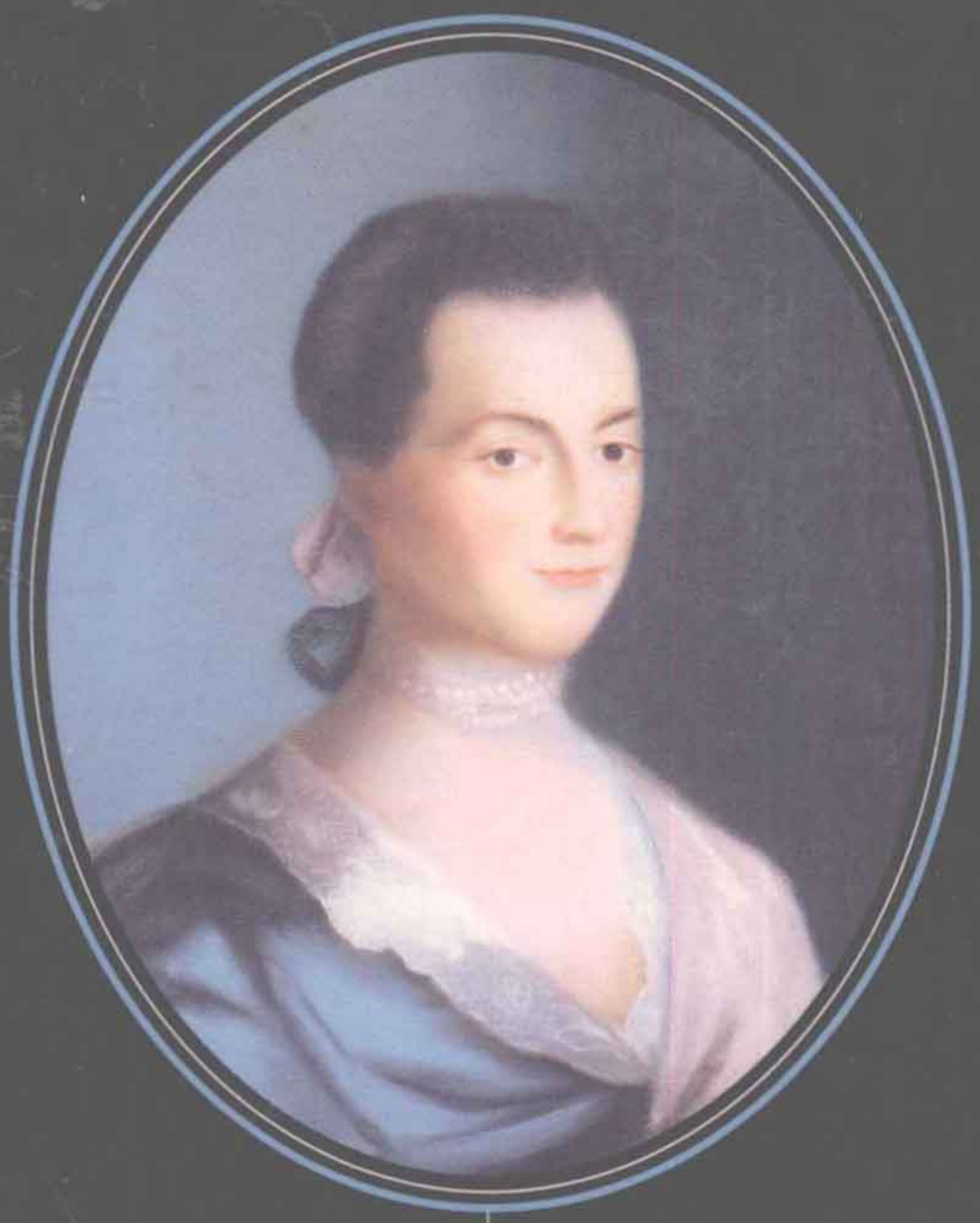

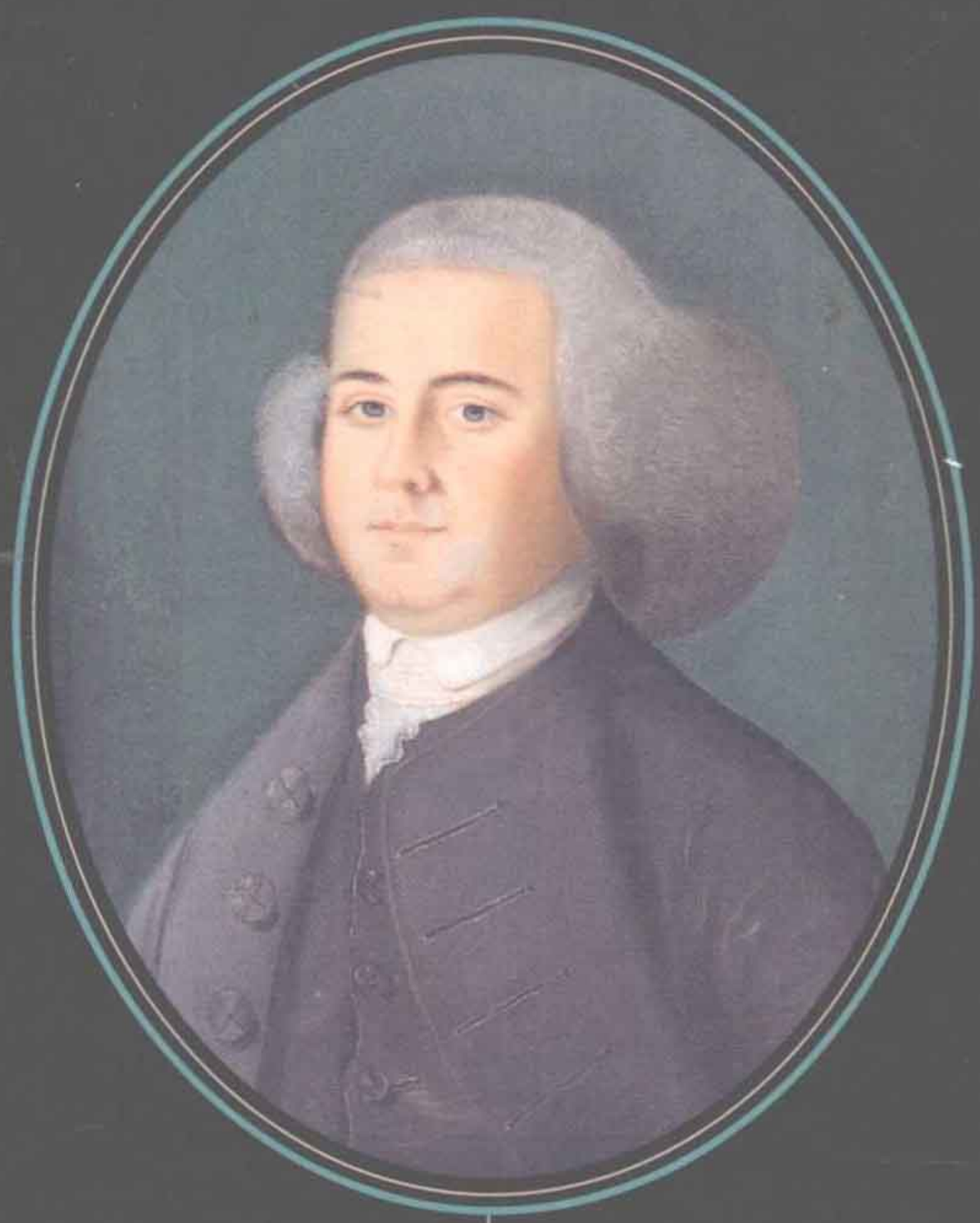

DESCENT FROM GLORY

Four Generations of the John Adams Family

PAUL C. NAGEL

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Acknowledgments

In this book I have described how various Adamses—both notable and forgotten—lived with each other as part of the astonishing family created when John Adams and Abigail Smith were married in 1764. That union began a story which was not completed until 1927 with the death of Brooks Adams, who left behind a collection of family letters and diaries extending back to the time of his famous great-grandparents. These sources, many never studied before, open a door to the private world of a family whose achievements in politics, diplomacy, and literature are unmatched in American history. Since every page of what I have written springs from this enormous body of manuscripts, I have not included footnotes, for their length and complexity would overpower the story. However, my annotated early drafts of this book will be available in the library of the Virginia Historical Society in Richmond.

Help from many quarters made this book possible. Not only did my wife, Joan Peterson Nagel, cheerfully endure the surrender of weekends and vacations, but she became nearly as familiar with the Adamses as I did. She prepared the genealogical table included here. My first thanks must go to her as partner and dearest friend—to use the terms relished by John and Abigail Adams. Members of the Adams family have been kind and encouraging. Particularly am I grateful to John Adams Abbott, M.D., his wife Diana Abbott, and to Thomas Boylston Adams and Dorothy Quincy Beckwith Nelson.

When I began my research in 1974, the Massachusetts Historical Society's staff helped me learn about sources beyond the 608 reels of

Adams Papers, which include no documents dated after 1889. Consequently, to examine the family's later correspondence and to use other materials concerning the Adamses, I spent many pleasant months in the Society's reading room on Boylston Street in Boston. If I have overlooked material there, it is my fault entirely. The Massachusetts Historical Society has permitted me to quote from the microfilm edition of the Adams Papers, from the Adams Papers—Fourth Generation, and from other important documents. I am most grateful to the Society for this and for the many personal courtesies shown to me by such generous individuals as Stephen T. Riley, who was director when I first appeared in Boston, and his successor, Louis L. Tucker; John D. Cushing, Librarian; Winifred V. Collins, who made suggestions and listened so charmingly; and Aimée F. Bligh, Patrick R. Flynn, Robert V. Sparks, and Ross F. Urquhart.

No less sizable is my debt to the editors of the Adams Papers, whose office is upstairs at the Massachusetts Historical Society. I regret that Lyman H. Butterfield, who was Editor-in-Chief when I set out to learn about the Adamses, did not live to read this book. Like that of everyone who recently has studied John Adams and his descendants, my work was strengthened by Mr. Butterfield's wisdom and friendship. His successor, Robert J. Taylor, carries on this tradition admirably. I am thankful to him in countless ways, as I am to his indefatigable colleague Marc Friedlaender, now Adjunct Editor after many years of working with all four generations of the family. More than once, Mr. Friedlaender in his cheerful and discerning way rescued me from discouragement and bewilderment. This book would not have been completed to my satisfaction except for the unfailing help of Celeste Walker, Assistant Editor of the Adams Papers, who pushed many obstacles out of my path. She has my gratitude and admiration.

There are many other debts I have to scholars and libraries. Important among these must be my thanks to the editors of the Henry Adams Papers at the University of Virginia, J. C. Levenson, Charles Vandersee, and Viola H. Winner. At the Boston Public Library the director, Philip J. McNiff, made matters easy for me. In Cambridge, I studied materials particularly in Harvard's Houghton Library, where William H. Bond and his colleagues saw that I lacked for nothing.

South from Boston and Cambridge is Quincy, the most important scene in the Adams story. There, the National Park Service staff at the Adams National Historic Site has been unfailingly considerate. I am especially grateful to Pat Sheehan and Marianne Peak. I shall say more

about Mrs. Wilhelmina Harris, the Superintendent at the site, in a moment. Many citizens of Quincy were cordial and helpful, especially Dorothy and Walter Wrigley, Owen Della Lucca, and H. Hobart Holly. I thank them and other friends in the community.

Three institutions have supported my project. The University of Missouri granted me a sabbatical leave in 1974–75. Money for travel and a microfilm reader came from the Research Council of the Graduate School, University of Missouri–Columbia. At the University of Georgia I owe a very special obligation to William J. Payne, Dean of Franklin College of Arts and Sciences, and to Robert C. Anderson, Vice President for Research. Their encouragement and kindnesses carried me over some difficult moments. Most recently, the Trustees of the Virginia Historical Society have disclosed a breadth of view astonishing even for Virginians by their enthusiasm for this study of Massachusetts people.

Reading my scrawl and typing this manuscript were burdens carried gracefully by two associates. Linda Green of the University of Georgia worked tirelessly not only in typing and retyping, but in helping me clarify my thoughts. Here at the Virginia Historical Society, Carol Wicker has joined me in the ordeal of revision with great skill and kindness. My good friend over many years, J. Rodney Kellar of Minneapolis, read the manuscript in an early state, greatly to my advantage. The book owes much to advice from Sheldon Meyer and Stephanie Golden of Oxford University Press and from Sallie F. Reynolds. Their gentle urgings have made a profound difference in what was finally written.

The last obligation I must mention is my largest. It is to Wilhelmina Sellers Harris, the Superintendent of the Adams National Historic Site, and once secretary to Mr. and Mrs. Brooks Adams. Without Mrs. Harris' knowledge, support, and hospitality, this book would be far less than it is. The Adams family has no greater friend than she, nor have I. To her I gratefully dedicate this book.

Richmond, Virginia
April 1982

P. C. N.

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Descent from Glory

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"The history of my family is not a pleasant one..."

Those who enter the private world of the Adams family must realize that no one was more fascinated by the story of John Adams and his descendants than they themselves. And so they produced an unrivaled body of introspection in the form of letters, diaries, autobiography, and biography, a storehouse of one family's thinking about itself. We of a later age can thereby appreciate the life and soul of this family which has been unmatched in the United States for public service and intellectual achievement. It is a moving, sobering saga—this personal story of John and Abigail Adams and those who came after them. No one ever described it better than their grandson, Charles Francis Adams, who said: "The history of my family is not a pleasant one to remember. It is one of great triumphs in the world but of deep groans within, one of extraordinary brilliancy and deep corroding mortification."

Charles Francis' statement is meaningless to observers who do not know intimate details of the Adams circle and who measure the family from America's perspective on worldly success. To such a superficial view, the only complaint John Adams' family might have had was at the defeat two Adams presidents met in seeking a second term. Except for that, the public achievement of four generations was one which no other family in the United States approached. As Charles Francis wrote, it is outwardly a story "of extraordinary brilliancy." John Adams, for instance, helped to shape America's independence through his service in the Continental Congress. He became one of America's first diplomats, during the period 1778–88, he served as the new nation's first minister to the Netherlands and then to Great Britain. He helped write

the peace treaty with England which confirmed the success of the American Revolution.

Thereafter, John's public life was in the rising federal democracy of which he was the first vice president, serving two terms from 1789–97. He then had one term as the nation's second president between 1797 and 1801. His courage, forthrightness, and abrasiveness created dissent in his Federalist faction and narrowly denied him reelection, so that he retired at age sixty-six to live another quarter century on the farm he loved in Quincy, Massachusetts.

Despite his defeat in the election of 1800, John's career seems astounding. There were new satisfactions when his son John Quincy Adams carried forward the family's reputation in statesmanship. This second Adams was especially distinguished in diplomacy, being in turn America's minister to the Netherlands, Prussia, Russia, and Great Britain. He was also the architect of peace terms which ended the War of 1812. He served as Secretary of State from 1817 to 1825 in President James Monroe's cabinet. John Quincy's accomplishments in the State Department were as extensive as his term as president between 1825 and 1829 was often frustrating. Like his father, the second Adams president was fearless in standing for causes which the American democracy hesitated to endorse. President John Adams' determination to keep the Republic out of war had been as costly to his political success as was President John Quincy Adams' effort to strengthen America through such means as a national university and an interstate highway system.

Shortly after his defeat for reelection in 1828, John Quincy resumed public life as a representative in Congress where he fearlessly battled slavery until his death in 1848. During this time, a third generation of Adamses entered public service as John Quincy's son Charles Francis gave himself to historical writing and to opposing slavery. Eventually, he became congressman from his father's old district and then, from 1861 to 1868, he was the third Adams to serve America as minister to Great Britain. In this role, Charles Francis' achievement was memorable, for by his success in keeping England from siding openly with the South in the Civil War, he earned a reputation as the American statesman whose contribution to preserving the Union was second only to Abraham Lincoln's.

After returning to the United States, Charles Francis Adams retired, resisting public demand that he run for president. He appeared for one more international triumph when he represented his country in

the Geneva Arbitrations during 1871–72. By this time, Charles Francis was more interested in watching his children carry forward in their turn the amazing record of John Adams' family. Each of his sons became nationally prominent, although in ways quite different from their forebears—and from each other. Of the four brothers, the weakest was the second John Quincy Adams who tried for a time to be a maverick politician in Massachusetts, running for vice president in 1868 on a minor party ticket. The second Charles Francis Adams became an advocate of railroad reform and eventually president of the Union Pacific Railroad. Afterwards, he published books and essays on historical and controversial topics. The two younger brothers, Henry and Brooks Adams, were distinguished as authors. Henry remains to many critics quite possibly America's finest writer of history. Both he and Brooks allowed their fascination by what they foresaw as the eventual decay of modern society to play a major part in their books. Brooks especially is noted for his warnings about the impending collapse of Western institutions.

This public attainment by one family is awesome, but to be fully appreciated, it needs to be placed beside the distressing story of the Adamses' private difficulties. Looking at this hidden side of his family's record, Charles Francis recalled how often the family's hopes had been frustrated. John Adams' brother Elihu died of dysentery in 1776 at age thirty-four; another brother, Peter Boylston Adams, became an ineffectual farmer who moved in the background of the family's life. He died in 1823 at age eighty-five. Then, among John's own sons, two had tragic lives of failure due to alcoholism, leaving only John Quincy to succeed. The same pattern appeared in the third generation, for of the three males born to John Quincy Adams, two were catastrophes for the family because of intemperance. Again, one child, Charles Francis, thrived. Charles Francis Adams, however, lived to see the grim pattern relent among his children. His four sons were all successes by some measure. However, with this fourth generation the public story of an extraordinary family closed. The unexceptional members of the fifth generation gave no sign of the potential and interest of their forebears, causing Henry and Brooks to speculate that perhaps the concentration of talent into only one member of each earlier generation had accounted for the family's quality. Had this peculiar vigor been forever diluted by its dissemination among the numerous remarkable children of Charles Francis Adams? His sons believed it had and seemed thankful that the painful greatness laid upon the Adamses was at an end.

Over the years, the Adams name itself led some members of the family to seek prominence. Others tried to be ignored. However, no Adams, success or failure, made a comfortable accommodation to life. Thus the lives of the eminent figures are no more revealing of the burdens of the family than the lives of the less renowned: John Quincy's sister, Nabby, and his two brothers, Charles and Thomas; the two brothers of Charles Francis, George and John; and in the fourth generation two sisters, Louisa and Mary. There are also the women who joined the family by marriage, notably Louisa Catherine Johnson, wife of John Quincy; Abigail Brown Brooks, wife of Charles Francis; Clover Hooper, wife of Henry; and Daisy Davis, wife of Brooks. The Adams story is as much about these individuals as it is about those who have a place in history.

The story is also shaped by a trait which marked the family and gave it much of its distinction. Near the end of the family saga, in 1914, the historian John T. Morse told Senator Henry Cabot Lodge that he had the clue to understanding the Adamses. "Being an Adams," Morse said, required that each "make some startling statement, it is a family propensity . . . it is the family way." Morse was referring to the Adamses' determination to be realistic about the weakness within mankind and society. Family members made this realism their outlook for nearly 150 years, allowing it to shape their careers in politics and literature. It gave them the "startling" quality Morse recognized. The result was that while Adamses earned the attention and acclaim of the public, they rarely hesitated to scold that public and to urge it to turn in another direction.

So it had been when John Adams as president stunned a war-bent America by insisting that peace with France must be maintained and by dismissing members of his Cabinet who opposed him. Constituents repudiated John Quincy Adams as a United States Senator when he refused to follow his Federalist Party's policies and instead supported the program of President Thomas Jefferson. Much of Boston was indignant when Charles Francis Adams demanded that the city recognize the unclean bond between Massachusetts industry and Southern slave labor. It was the same even in the final generation when Brooks Adams alarmed the few who read his books by his advocacy of a totalitarian society. Such courage, stubbornness, and candor made the Adamses often appear outrageously independent and brought them repudiation or, what was worse, neglect from the nation, a plight complicated by the abrasive traits for which most Adamses were famous. Rarely was any family member said to have much personal charm.

When John Quincy Adams first assailed the Southern slaveocracy as a congressman, he stood alone, threatened with censure and unseating by his outraged colleagues. As the North grew belatedly to respect and follow the old man's exhortations, the outcome seemed once more to illustrate where the Adamses stood in the course of American history. The family provided individuals of great talent who served their country well, but whose viewpoints were usually ahead of or above those prevailing in their day. Adamses wanted to help, to lead, to inspire their fellow citizens. However, a nation which increasingly claimed that individuals were sure to thrive in a free, competitive society could not long be patient with reminders that the optimism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was not to be taken seriously. Inevitably, the Adamses were often repudiated or ignored, leaving them feeling misunderstood and unappreciated, but not surprised.

The mark then, of the Adamses' greatness, and what divided them from their peers, was this capacity to see with painful clarity the shortcomings within themselves and those about them. John Adams had matured in a time when assurances about human nature and individual rights were growing in America, thanks to the so-called Enlightenment and Age of Reason prevailing in Europe. John, however, always remained skeptical about such ideas, his misgiving arising from the religious teachings of his youth, when his father had begged him to become a clergyman. Much of what John learned came from the old Puritan and Calvinist messages about sin-ridden man's helplessness before God. This sobering view also contends that men should strive to be good stewards, should seek to labor for lofty causes despite the knowledge that mortals are capable ultimately of only evil and folly. While this paradox troubled and even mystified John Adams and his descendants, it led them into seeking public office and into writing books and essays to admonish both themselves and their fellow citizens.

All four generations of Adamses wanted to provide leadership and criticism that might move others to a more cautious and thoughtful engagement in democracy. Both John and John Quincy Adams tried to help advance the American nation, yet both were often sorely tempted to turn away, suspecting that such effort was doomed by the nature of mankind. While Charles Francis Adams approached this dilemma more cautiously, he too had the same anxiety. Like his father and grandfather, he managed to draw solace and a measure of understanding from elements in the Judaic-Christian scriptures and traditions. The final "great" generation, that of Henry and Brooks Adams, existed

without the comfort of religious commitment. For the justice of God, Henry and Brooks substituted a scientific fatalism which stressed the same limits and ultimate failure of humanity that had fascinated their forebears. To these last prominent members of the great family, pessimism about human nature in a free society seemed as justified as it had to their ancestors.

By the time of the third generation, Charles Francis Adams recognized how his family's dissent caused it to be misunderstood and poorly appreciated. To help correct this, he published family letters, diary excerpts, and sketches which disclosed some pleasing aspects in the personal life of his forebears. Charles Francis resolved to do this in the 1830s after he began reading the letters that John Adams had written to his wife Abigail a half-century before. He recognized at once the "high-toned honesty" which had characterized his grandfather, and also that "gentler tones of affection are constantly to be found." It was in these kindly moods of John Adams "that the public understands him very little," said his grandson who now appreciated the importance of preserving the heaps of family letters and diaries. These not only displayed the real "spirit of action" among his relatives, but presented the Adams story in a much more intimate and appealing light.

As he read the manuscripts left by earlier generations, Charles Francis decided that historians actually revealed little about the persons of whom they wrote. The ordinary historical search, he complained, did not take the reader beyond the outer design: "We look for the workings of the heart when those of the head alone are presented to us." He proposed an astonishing change in biography, knowing that this might improve history's view of his father and grandfather. Authors should leave aside "the reasoning of the intellect," he suggested, and push on to find "the confidential whisper to a friend, never meant to reach the ear of the multitude, the secret wishes, not to be blazoned forth to catch the applause, the fluctuations between fear and hope, that most betray the springs of action." All these, for Charles Francis, were the genuine "guides to character," although he knew that these insights came from sources which usually vanished. Only "the coarser elements" ordinarily survived as the biographer's data, a loss which Charles Francis deplored. Yet when he had the opportunity, his delicacy kept him from including in his editions of family papers many of the most personal documents and passages. He left it for a later time to recreate the family's inward life, knowing that this story would even-

tually be needed for the world to understand the great but painful career of the Adamses.

For this reason, the chapters which follow tell of the Adamses at home, where the family derived its personality from moments of failure, sorrow, and frustration as much as from times of triumph. Both the personal and the public careers of the Adamses must be understood if we are to appreciate adequately those family attainments talked about in history books. This dawned upon one of America's most distinguished historians, Samuel Flagg Bemis, after he devoted much of his career to studying the public life of John Quincy Adams. When he put down his pen after completing the final volume of his biography, Bemis conceded that the work was unfinished since he said it still remained for someone to "probe Adams' inner life and character."

Our opportunity to know the Adamses as Bemis recommended comes because they recorded their life and thoughts so fully; because their manuscripts escaped destruction by carelessness and accident; and because later generations of the family decided in 1956 to give these Adams papers to scholarship and to the public. In these documents, the souls of Adams men and women linger much as when they loved and labored together within the family. The manuscripts contain a story never fully told until now. We must try to draw from these papers the moving history of those "deep groans within" and the "deep corroding mortification" which Charles Francis Adams saw so clearly but could not divulge. Such is the purpose of this book.

1

Beginnings

For several generations before John and Abigail's story began, there was nothing significant about the Adams family. Henry Adams came to America and settled in Massachusetts Bay, perhaps as early as 1632, evidently from Somersetshire in England where his father had been a John Adams. Little is known of the family in Great Britain, nor is there much to say about them after Henry established himself as a maltster and farmer in Braintree, a few miles south of Boston.

Henry had several sons. One of those accompanying his father from England was Joseph, whose son Joseph in 1691 had a son named John. This John Adams was the father of that John Adams with whom the family's great career began.

The elder John Adams, eventually known as Deacon John to distinguish him from his famous son, led a rural existence hardly different from that of his forebears except for an ardent involvement in the local parish and a determination that his son John, born in 1735, should go to Harvard College and become a clergyman. The Deacon's wife and John's mother, Susanna, was a lively person who went on to marry again after her husband's death, also surviving this second mate by many years. She was descended from the Boylstons, one of the colony's most vigorous and successful families, thus providing the only notable alliance in the Adams family's early story, except for Deacon John's mother, Hannah Bass, whose grandparents were John Alden and Priscilla Mullins.

How such a forceful and talented person as John Adams awakened from this background was a cause for wonderment to his introspective