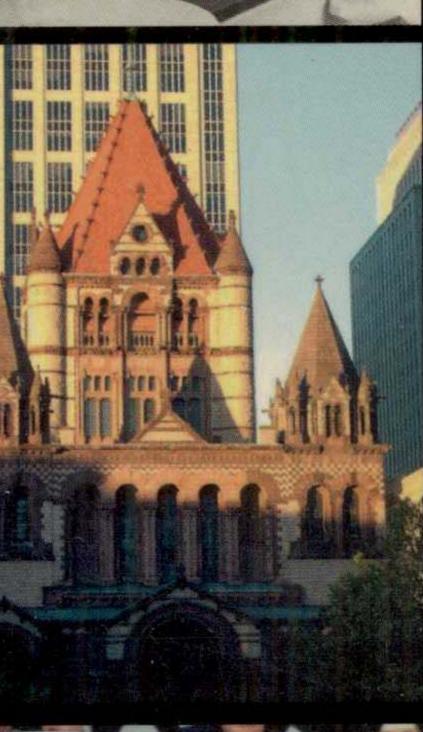




# EMINENT BOSTONIANS



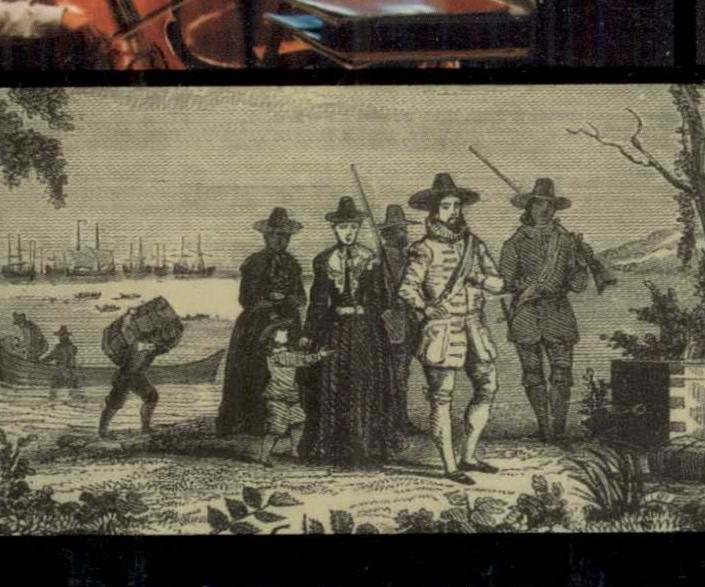


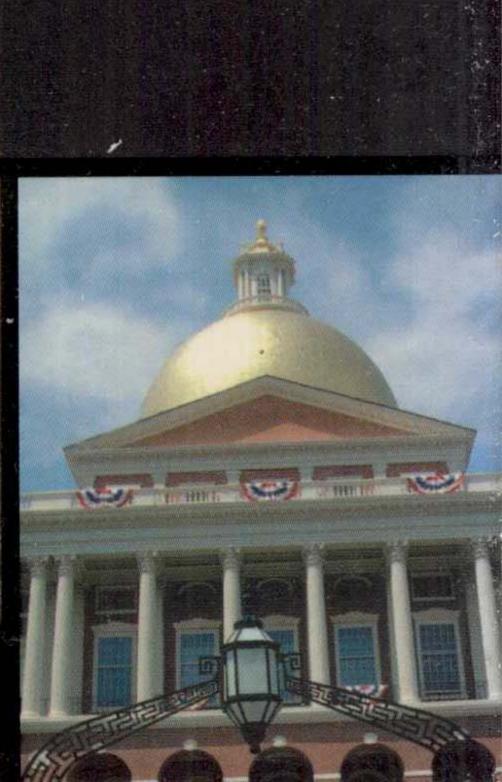












THOMAS H. O'CONNOR

# **T**EMINENT BOSTONIANS

Thomas H. O'Connor

HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS
LONDON, ENGLAND • 2002

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Designed by Annamarie Why

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
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O'Connor, Thomas H., 1922—
Eminent Bostonians / Thomas H. O'Connor.

p. cm.
Includes index.
ISBN 0-674-00942-8 (alk. paper)
I. Boston (Mass.)—Biography. 2. Boston (Mass.)—History. I. Title.
F73.25.O28 2002
920.0744'61—dc21 2002068616
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## T EMINENT BOSTONIANS

# PREFACE: FOOTPRINTS ON THE SANDS OF TIME

Some years ago I was interviewing an elderly neighbor about growing up in a small Irish Catholic neighborhood in Boston early in the century. Although he was well into his eighties, the old man had an excellent memory, and he sat back in his easy chair, smiling, as he reminisced about an era of gaslights, horse-drawn wagons, narrow streets, crowded pubs, parish priests, and corner cops. But he recalled with special fondness the women who had been his grammar school teachers in the local public school in those days. Severe in appearance, modest in dress, and completely dedicated to their profession-women of "significant glances and few words," as one historian has described them—they not only insisted upon such basic essentials as correct spelling, proper grammar, and legible handwriting, but also managed to convey to their young charges an appreciation of the elements of poetry, music, and the fine arts. The old gentleman remembered the way his sixth-grade teacher would start off each class with a reading of the 23rd or 24th Psalm "so that the rhythm and the ideas of those beautiful poems became second nature to us." He also took a great deal of pleasure in the fact that he and many of his old schoolmates, even fifty or sixty years later, could still recall verbatim many of the poems they had been forced to memorize—and he promptly launched into an emotional rendition of "The Charge of the Light Brigade" for my edification.

Those of us who attended the Boston schools in those days when the rigorous process of memorization was regarded as a social benefit, not an educational taboo, will undoubtedly recall Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem "A Psalm of Life," which reminds us that the lives and accomplishments of those who have gone before us can often provide some measure of inspiration for those who follow in their footsteps. As I am sure most readers of my generation will recall, the most memorable lines went:

Lives of great men all remind us We can make our lives sublime. And, departing, leave behind us Footprints on the sands of time.

The practice of singling out notable figures as inspirational models for other generations to admire and to emulate has a long and illustrious tradition, beginning with Plutarch and his lives of forty-six Greek and Roman heroes, and extending to the early twentieth century, when Lytton Strachey revived the genre of multiple biographies with his Eminent Victorians. I'm afraid that my own introduction to memorable figures was neither that long nor that distinguished. I guess the first time I was aware of any kind of formal presentation of inspirational models was when I attended parochial grammar school and the nuns had us read a children's version of The Lives of the Saints. Apostles and disciples, virgins and martyrs, preachers and hermits, missionaries and explorers, bishops and confessors (I never really figured out who they were): the example of their courage and sacrifices was intended to strengthen our religious faith and improve our obviously weak characters. Later, when I went on to the Boston Latin School, I was introduced to a litany of a much more secular sainthood, men whose names were emblazoned on a frieze that ran along the edge of the ceiling in the school's large auditorium. John Adams, John Hancock, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the like (all white males in those days), they were graduates of the oldest public school in America who had gone on to attain eminence in politics, scholarship, and science. Their grand achievements were designed to inspire in our young hearts and minds a commitment to excellence and a passion for success.

This present collection of brief lives of Eminent Bostonians differs in several respects from earlier compilations of biographies of x Preface

persons whose notable careers were considered worthy of study. First of all, the people I have singled out in this volume have come from all walks of life, various economic levels, and different social classes. Their inclusion is determined by the positive contributions they have made to the life and society of their city, rather than by having been members of an aristocracy in which their eminence would be assured by the exalted nature of their birth or the social pedigree of their family. Second, not all of the Eminent Bostonians in this volume were actually born in the city of Boston, but all of them contributed in some distinctive and constructive way to the life and culture of the city. Some, like the Adamses and the Hancocks, came up from the South Shore towns of Braintree and Duxbury; others, like the Lawrences, were members of the "codfish aristocracy" who came down from the North Shore towns of Essex County. In more recent years, many persons left their original homes in various parts of Europe, Asia, and Africa, to become citizens of a new city. Their eventual importance to Boston is not where they originated, but how they came to renew and redefine the life and society of the city of which they had become an integral part.

The selection and arrangement of these Eminent Bostonians were, of course, matters of considerable discussion. Some selections are so obvious that failure to include them would arouse the collective wrath of those already well acquainted with the history of the city. Other names will be immediately recognized by readers who may recall having seen them in an earlier Harvard University Press publication called Boston A to Z. Some names may be vaguely familiar from early childhood memories, school lessons, family anecdotes, or newspaper gossip. And others may be completely new to readers. They are, admittedly, an odd mixture of the famous and the modest, the brilliant and the ordinary, the wealthy and the poor, the artist and the athlete, the native and the newcomer. But in one way or another, each one of them added something personal and distinctive to the continually fascinating history of the city.

As far as arrangement is concerned, there were many possibilities, but we ultimately decided on a simple alphabetical listing ranging over the almost 400 years of Boston's history. This arrangement pro-

Preface

vides both the appearance of method and the pleasures of serendipitous association: a best-selling woman novelist is found between a nineteenth-century Harvard scientist and a twentieth-century radio comedian. The story of a disabled young woman comes between the accomplishments of a colonial housewife on one side, and the life of a celebrated Boston churchman on the other. A prize-winning Olympic athlete finds himself situated between a colorful big-city mayor and a world-renowned painter. A remarkable modern scientist can be found alongside a famous musical conductor, followed by a well-known African American social reformer. And so it goes. This sometimes jarring sequence of unusual and often contradictory personalities seems to me somewhat evocative of the idiosyncratic character of Boston itself. I have always thought that one of the more lovable and distinctive aspects of Boston is the rather haphazard way in which its buildings cluster together—colonial meetinghouses, Federal townhouses, and Greek Revival market buildings side by side with Victorian mansions, Gothic Revival cathedrals, and high-rise skyscrapers. They are all separate and distinctive, and yet they all merge into a striking unity that conveys something of the distinctiveness of the city.

Actually, the choice of who is included and who is not included in such a volume will probably create much more controversy than the way in which they are arranged. The selection of some of these figures will undoubtedly upset many readers; the omission of other figures will certainly enrage others. But that kind of dissent is inevitable in any project based on personal decisions and subjective judgments. I will leave it to my readers to reflect upon the long and fascinating history of Boston, and decide for themselves which men and women would be their choice for the prestigious title of Eminent Bostonians.

Thomas H. O'Connor Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts April 15, 2002

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#### ABIGAIL ADAMS

In an age of increasing gender consciousness and growing feminist pride, the figure of Abigail Adams has emerged from the shadows of the past to assume a much more visible and significant role in American history. Her keen observations regarding the implications of independence, the foibles of men, and the potential of women have marked her as a thoughtful, intelligent, articulate, and far-seeing woman, well in advance of her time.

Abigail Smith was born in 1744, the second child of William Smith, a Weymouth minister, and Elizabeth Quincy, of the nearby town of Braintree. A highly intelligent young woman of strong Congregational convictions, Abigail never attended school because of poor health, but her father had an excellent library and, with the guidance of her brother-in-law, Richard Cranch, Abigail and her sisters were educated beyond what was offered to most girls of that time. Abigail became politically aware, well read in the classics and in current affairs.

On October 24, 1764, Abigail Smith married a promising young lawyer from Braintree, John Adams, who had known her family for many years. While John spent most of his time traveling to court sessions in Boston, Abigail kept house and produced five children, two of whom died in infancy. In 1788 John moved his family to Boston, where they rented a house in Brattle Square. Once again Abigail concentrated on the upbringing of the children, while John was soon off to Philadelphia to serve as a member of the Continental Congress.

Over the years, John and Abigail engaged in a long, lively, and loving correspondence involving serious issues of state as well as personal expressions of love. Into the period of rebellion, and throughout the years of Revolution, Abigail proved to be a constant, brilliant, and perceptive correspondent, responding to her husband's activities and offering her wise, mature, and sometimes critical comments. She followed his involvement in the affairs of the Con-

tinental Congress, and in March 1774 advised him to carefully think through the implications of the declaration of independence on which he was working. "I desire you would remember the ladies," she famously wrote, "and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors!" Abigail was also concerned with the education of women, and urged her husband to see that the new nation had "learned women" as well as heroes, statesmen, and philosophers. "If you complain of neglect of Education in sons," she wrote, "what shall I say with regard to daughters."

Abigail Adams followed the course of independence closely and communicated with her "Dearest Friend" regularly. In June 1775, with her eight-year-old son, she watched from a rooftop in Boston as the smoke from the flaming houses of Charlestown blackened the sky, and a short time later reported the death of their friend, Dr. Joseph Warren, at the Battle of Bunker Hill. "The race is not swift, nor the battle strong," she wrote, confirming her faith in the future, "but the God of Israel is he that giveth strength and power unto his people." A year later, on March 17, 1776, she described the scene as the "largest Fleet ever seen in America," the occupying British, evacuated the town and sailed out of Boston Harbor. The following month she wrote to her husband about how she first heard the words of the Declaration of Independence proclaimed from the balcony of Boston's Old State House. When the reading was concluded, she wrote, the cannon was discharged, and all the people shouted "God save our American states!" After the surrender of the British following the Battle of Yorktown in 1781, she anxiously waited for John to complete his work in Paris on the final peace treaty so that at last her "dearest of Friends and the tenderest of Husbands" would return home.

When the Treaty of Paris was finally signed and the Revolution over, Abigail and some of the children joined John in London, where he was serving as ambassador to Great Britain. When they returned to America, they lived in New York City while John served as the first vice-president in George Washington's administration. In 1796 Abigail somewhat reluctantly supported her husband's decision to offer himself for the presidency, but feared that on the national scene

she might not have the "patience, prudence, and discretion" displayed by Martha Washington, whom she had come to know and greatly admire. After John Adams's victory in 1796, the couple moved to the temporary capital at Philadelphia, but after two years Abigail decided to return home to Massachusetts. After a serious bout of illness that almost proved fatal, she once again returned to her husband, and became the first First Lady to occupy the newly constructed presidential mansion in Washington, D.C. John and Abigail did not remain residents of the White House very long, however, for in November 1800 John Adams was defeated by his rival, Thomas Jefferson, and the Adamses returned to Massachusetts for good.

Although Abigail Smith Adams had the pleasure of seeing her oldest son, John Quincy Adams, sworn into office in 1817 as Secretary of State to President James Monroe, she did not live long enough to see him go on to achieve the presidency. After coming down with typhoid fever, John Adams's loving wife and constant companion of fifty-four years died on October 28, 1818, just before her seventy-fourth birthday.

#### T HENRY ADAMS

Henry Adams had one of the most distinguished pedigrees of any man in American history. He was the great-grandson of John Adams, second President of the United States; grandson of John Quincy Adams, the sixth President; and son of the reformist statesman Charles Francis Adams, Lincoln's minister to England during the Civil War. His brothers, Brooks Adams and Charles Francis Adams, Jr., shared his lifelong interest in writing history and in exploring the philosophy of history.

Born in Boston in 1838, Henry Adams graduated from Harvard in 1858, and studied law at Berlin and Dresden during 1859–60. After the outbreak of the Civil War he went to Washington as secretary to

his father, and then accompanied his father to London, where he continued to serve as secretary at the Court of St. James's. In this capacity, Henry learned much about the process of diplomacy, met the most famous British statesmen and scientists, and broadened the Harvard education he believed had failed him so badly. He would later write *The Education of Henry Adams*, a third-person autobiography, complaining of how his undergraduate study, with its antiquated methods and outmoded curriculum, had turned him out more suited to life in the Middle Ages than in the modern world. With what Martin Green has described as an air of "plaintive hopelessness," Adams expressed annoyance that his Harvard education had failed to instruct him in the ways of the city and the machine, and had ignored completely the major social issues confronting industrial society.

Returning to America, Adams was both fascinated and repelled by the crudeness and strength of America in the postwar years. He gave up the idea of practicing law and turned to journalism, writing critical articles about such captains of industry as Jay Gould and James Fisk, and commenting on the corruption of politics and business. In 1870 he accepted Harvard's invitation to teach medieval history, but soon added courses in early American history. By 1877 he had given up teaching and settled permanently in Washington, D.C., with his Boston bluestocking wife Marian "Clover" Hooper. He incorporated many of his observations on the machinations of Washington political life in an anonymous novel called Democracy, which caused quite a stir when it was published in 1880. In 1879 he completed work on an excellent and appreciative biography of Albert Gallatin, followed in 1882 by an unsympathetic study of the eccentric John Randolph of Virginia. In 1885, he was shattered by the suicide of his wife and embarked on an extended tour of Asia before returning to Washington.

By this time he was fully engaged in what would become his major work, The History of the United States during the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison, in nine volumes (1889–1892). Adams's History, given his early background, was particularly expert in diplomatic affairs, and its coverage of the War of 1812 was exceptionally

well done. Although the bias of the Adams family against Thomas Jefferson and the Republican administration is apparent, Adams nevertheless displays both accuracy and thoroughness in dealing with national issues, drawing heavily upon original sources from both European and American depositories. American historians were almost unanimous in their praise of Adams's *History of the United States* when the final volume appeared in 1892, and in tribute to this outstanding work of historical research, they elected him president of the prestigious American Historical Association.

In his approach to the philosophy of history, Henry Adams bypassed the Social Darwinism that influenced so many other historians and social scientists during the late nineteenth century. He drew, instead, upon what he saw as the potential of the New Physics as a means of historical analysis. He felt that the implications of the New Physics, particularly its Second Law of Thermodynamics concerning the conservation of energy and the equilibrium of force, could eventually be reduced to a kind of mathematical formula that could be applied to the study and writing of history. Some of Adams's thoughts about a scientific philosophy of history can be seen in his study Mont Saint Michel and Chartres (1904), in which he speculates about the ways in which the Virgin Mary served as a powerful force in stimulating the magnificent art and inspiring architecture of the medieval centuries. In trying to find a modern counterpart, he suggested that perhaps the Dynamo might be regarded as an energizing symbol of the modern technological spirit. Adams's incessant urging of teachers and historians to seek a philosophy of history based on the New Physics left most professionals unconvinced, although his gifted brother, Brooks Adams, did use natural science as a major theme in his own historical writings.

His last major work, and the one most read today, *The Education of Henry Adams*, was privately printed and distributed to a select circle of his friends in 1906. In the early sections of the book, he recounts his Boston boyhood and muses on his Adams heritage. After Henry Adams's death in 1918, the book was published to widespread acclaim and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize.

### **3** JOHN ADAMS

"Sit down, John. For God's sake, John, sit down!" sing the members of the Continental Congress to John Adams in the Broadway musical 1776. But John Adams would not sit down and continued, in his stubborn, determined, and occasionally obnoxious manner, to insist upon a separation between the American colonies and the British Empire. And in the end, Adams had his way. He was pleased to add his own signature to those of the other American representatives on the Declaration of Independence.

Born in 1735 in the small farming community of Braintree, Mass., John Adams had Boston connections through his mother Susanna Boylston, the daughter of a Boston physician. Young John graduated from Harvard College in 1755, later studied law, and was admitted to the Massachusetts bar in 1758. In 1764 he married Abigail Smith of Weymouth, in a loving union that would be a significant influence on his public and private life.

John Adams soon became involved in the increasingly tense relations between the American colonists and the British government. In 1765 he wrote the "resolution and protest" for the town of Braintree, and came out publicly against the Stamp Act. In 1768 he moved his family to Boston and successfully defended John Hancock against charges of smuggling. In 1700, after British soldiers killed five colonials during the Boston Massacre, Adams agreed to defend the soldiers. Insisting that every accused person had the right to a fair trial, Adams achieved acquittal for the British soldiers on the grounds of self-defense.

Adams was less judicious in his reaction against the passage of the Tea Act, however. In December 1773 he wrote that the Boston Tea Party was "the grandest event" since the trouble with Britain began. The following year he was selected to represent Massachusetts in the first Continental Congress, and was reelected to the second. Early in 1776, Adams supported the idea of separation from Britain, seconded Richard Henry Lee's motion for independence, and worked