

THE ADAMS FAMILY

BY

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New England," "New England in the Republic," etc.*



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PREFACE

THE family whose story is told in this volume (and with which I am in no way connected) is the most distinguished in the United States. Suddenly passing from village obscurity into international fame in the latter part of the eighteenth century, it has ever since maintained a preëminent position, due neither to great wealth nor to a hereditary title, but to character and sheer intellectual ability. It is this, in part, which gives it a unique interest, although the life of each of its members here chronicled has an interest also of its own. The volume, however, is not intended to be merely a series of biographies. It is essentially a *biography of a family*, thrown against the changing background of its times for a hundred and fifty years. Indeed, the family is in part used as a sort of measuring rod to measure the extent of the change in its environment. The chief purpose of the book is thus not at all genealogical, and only in a minor degree individually biographical.

The writings of the various members of the family from 1750 onward are extremely voluminous, and have been heavily drawn upon. I am particularly indebted to Messrs. Houghton Mifflin and Company for permission to quote at considerable length from works of which they hold the copyright. As always, Mr. Worthington C. Ford has proved among the kindest of friends and most helpful of scholars. Mr. William Adams Slade, of the Library of Congress, Mr. Henry Osborn Taylor, Mr. M. A. DeWolfe Howe, and others, have also helped me with material and counsel. Owing to my temporary absence in England, Professor Allan Nevins, of Columbia University, kindly took upon himself the task of reading the proof. I am greatly indebted to the Massachusetts Historical Society, the American Antiquarian Society, and the British Museum for much trouble taken on my behalf, as I am also

to Mr. Edward Weeks, of the Atlantic Monthly Press, for suggestions made when reading the manuscript, and to members of the Adams family for their kind help in procuring the illustrations. One makes one's own mistakes, but one succeeds only with the help of one's fellows, and to those named above, and many more, I offer most cordial thanks.

JAMES TRUSLOW ADAMS

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THE ADAMS FAMILY

PROLOGUE

TITLES in an aristocracy, colossal inherited wealth in a modern democracy, may keep a family in the public eye for many generations, but in any country in the world it is so rare as almost to be unique that one family should remain leaders of their time, and play great parts upon the stage of their day, merely because of a sequence of individuals, generation after generation, who combine character and intellect far above those of the common run of their contemporaries. The line of a Cromwell or a Napoleon, a Kant or a Descartes, a Burke or a Pitt, a Shakespeare or a Scott, a Marlborough or a Grant, a Jefferson or a Lincoln, soon disappears in the multitude of society, like a stream lost in the sands of a desert.

In America there is one family, and only one, that generation after generation has consistently and without interruption made contributions of the highest order to our history and civilization. After four generations of simple but public-spirited yeomen, following the primal immigration from England, a something, we know not what, occurred in the blood or brain of the line and lifted it to a higher plane, from which it has never descended. The family story is an inspiring tale and a fascinating problem. That a farmer's son should become a President is, happily, no strange phenomenon in the great democracy, but it is strange indeed, that *his* descendants, for five generations, by public service in the highest of offices or by intellectual contributions, should remain leaders of the nation which their ancestor so conspicuously helped to found. This is the tale we have to tell.

About the year 1608, in the little village of Charlton Mackrell, on the River Cary, among the Polden Hills in the heart of

English Somersetshire, a young girl was being courted by a lad from the neighboring village of Barton St. David. We know little enough about them at that time, and their love-making is safe from the intrusion of even an historian's guess. The girl's name was Edith, and she was the daughter of a certain Henry Squire. Beyond that flicker of light all else is darkness. The lad, who made her his wife in the year 1609 or thereabouts, was Henry Adams, a young farmer who held some land, by the old English system of copyhold, from the Lord of the Manor of Barton St. David. How rapidly children came to fill the farmhouse we do not know, but, in all, eight sons and one daughter lived to grow up, and in those days of high infant mortality there may well have been more births of which history is silent. The youngest of the eight sons of whom we have knowledge was apparently born in 1626, and it is not until he was about ten years old that we can begin clearly to trace the family story.

By that year, 1636, times had become hard in England and all ranks in the population had grown restive. There were, of course, the religious disputes which had brought trouble to many and caused some to seek asylum in other lands. But, in addition to this, life had become suddenly difficult in other ways. There had been a great increase in the cost of living, which had completely upset the domestic economy and habits of a large part of the population. Farm lands had risen enormously in value and in rent, largely as a result of the vast expansion of the cloth trade, which now suffered a severe decline. Taxes and other exactions of the government had been steadily mounting. There were new rich and new poor, a general dislocation of old-established standards and modes of living and of comparative social and economic positions. Between 1620 and about 1640, sixty-five thousand persons emigrated from England for America and the West Indies, without counting the numbers who sought new fortune in Ireland. For some reason, Henry Adams decided to abandon the home where his family had probably lived for generations, and to try his luck in the New World. The moving cause may

have been religious or it may have been economic, or, as was so often the case, a combination of the two.

We know no more as to why he chose Massachusetts as his destination. The New England colonies were not nearly so popular among emigrants as the other continental and West Indian ones, about as many persons having gone to the one island of Barbados alone as had settled in all the Puritan colonies together. It is possible, although unlikely, that Adams was a relative of the Thomas Adams who was one of the grantees of the Massachusetts charter, and that his attention was thus drawn to that colony. It may have been his form of religious belief or the lure of holding land in fee simple. At any rate, for whatever reason, about 1636 he arrived at Boston with his wife and nine children to start life over in a new and strange world. He was granted land at Mount Wollaston, afterward called Braintree, and managed to establish a foothold. After his burial on the eighth of October, 1646, the inventory of his estate reveals that he had a house and barn, a cow and a calf, some pigs, furniture and utensils, and three beds — one in *the* parlor and two in *the* chamber. More noteworthy, and probably relics of the old days in England, were a silver spoon and some old books. The estate was worth about £75, equally divided between real and personal property. He had done his work well. If he had not become a figure in his new small world, he had made the great resolve, taken the great responsibility, and had lived long enough to establish his transplanted family firmly in their new surroundings. He had given them opportunity, whether in his mind that lay in freedom to worship according to the Puritan mode or to become great in a new country.

His youngest son, Joseph, who was about twenty when his father died, married, four years later, November 26, 1650, Abigail Baxter, and lived till the sixth of December, 1694. He begat twelve children, established a brewery as an adjunct to his farm, became a selectman of the town of Braintree, and once served as a surveyor of highways. His second child, Joseph II, with whom we are concerned, was born December 24,

1654, but we may note in passing that it was from his next son, John, that Samuel Adams of Revolutionary fame was descended as grandson.

Joseph II had three wives and eleven children, but we need consider only one of each. Although the family was not as yet showing any ability to act on a wider stage than that of village life, Joseph got ahead a bit on that. He did, indeed, rise no higher in office than selectman and constable, but for his second wife he married, February 8, 1692, Hannah Bass, a granddaughter on one side of Deacon Samuel Bass, and on the other of John and Priscilla Alden. It was a step up, although John and Priscilla did not weigh quite so heavily as ancestors then as they do now, and the distinction of marrying a granddaughter of the Deacon may have been lowered a trifle by the fact that he had a hundred and sixty-two descendants born to him before his own death. However, a deacon was a highly important figure in the tiny village life of that day, and a budding ambition in the family for better things is shown by the fact that Joseph educated his oldest son at Harvard in order that he might become, as he did, a clergyman, which then spelled, locally, both political power and social prestige. The family, in a modest way, was evidently prospering, for, as against the £75 left by Henry, Joseph I had left an estate of nearly £350, and in 1690 Joseph II, although one of twelve children, was assessed nearly as heavily in taxes as his father. He lived on until February 12, 1737, nearly the beginning of our real story. With the birth, January 28, 1691, of Joseph II's second son, John, we reach a life that overlaps it.

John lived on a farm through which ran the main street of the town of Braintree, and besides being a farmer, as were over 90 per cent of the population of the colonies at that time, practised the trade of shoemaker. He was a constable, a selectman year after year, and a lieutenant in the militia, refusing a captaincy out of loyalty to his commanding officer in a squabble that gentleman, Colonel John Quincy, had with Joseph Gooch. Yet more important, by 1747 he had been made a deacon, and on October 31, 1734, had married Susanna Boylston, daughter

of Peter Boylston of Brookline, of a family prominent in the medical history of the colony. Of their three children, the eldest, born October 19, 1735, was named John, for his father, and, fortunately for him, being the eldest, was given a college education at Harvard. The father died May 25, 1760, and the steady growth of the modest family fortunes is indicated by the value of his estate, £1330.

Thus far, the family had not displayed the slightest element of greatness or distinction of either mind or achievement. They had been hard-working, pious, reliable, public-spirited village folk. A few miles away in Boston countingrooms or State House, fortunes were being built up, reputations gained, and history made. In fact, in view of the amount of history spun in Boston, the smallness of the stage on which the actors played their parts is noteworthy. When the first Henry arrived in 1636 or so, the town had a population of about 3000, which had increased to only about 15,000 by the time Deacon John died. Yet in a hundred and twenty-five years not an Adams had played any speaking part in the crisis after crisis which had marked the history of the little community in its internal development or its relations with England. In spite of strong aristocratic tendencies in the social life of the day, there were self-made men in plenty, and the names of the leaders shift in every generation. There was no lack of opportunity for able men — opportunity in trade and land speculation, in military affairs from the war with the Pequots to that with the French; above all, there was political opportunity in the more than a century of incessant wrangling with England by the town deputies in the colonial legislature, known as the "Great and General Court." But of the four generations of Adamses, all doing their private and public duty well in the narrow sphere of their village, none had shown either the ability or the ambition to take part in the larger life of the colony. Thus far the most important man they had produced was, in the third generation, a village pastor in New Hampshire. With the fifth generation, in the person of John Adams, historian, publicist, diplomat, President of the United States,

the family not only suddenly achieves national and international position, but maintains it in successive generations for two centuries. Was it due to some mysterious result from the combination of Adams and Boylston blood far beyond the ken of science even to-day; or to some unfathomable synchronism between the peculiar qualities of the Adamses and the whole social atmosphere of the next few generations, a subtle interplay of unknown forces; or to mere chance in a universe in which atoms rush and collide chaotically? Fascinating as the problem is, it is insoluble. All we shall see is that without warning, like a "fault" in the geologic record, there is a sudden and immense rise recorded in the psychical energy of the family. For a couple of generations this new energy finds itself in harmony with the greater lines of force acting upon human society; then, with little diminution in itself, its line of direction fails to continue to coincide with those of the greater forces driving human society along its path. It is the purpose of this book to describe the phenomenon, without attempting to explain it.

THE FIRST GENERATION
JOHN ADAMS

JOHN ADAMS

I

YOUTH

THE house in which John Adams was born was of the type still familiar among the older farmhouses throughout the north-eastern United States — two stories in front, with a short pitched roof rising to the ridge, and sweeping downward thence in a long line to within six or eight feet of the ground at the back. Although we think of it as “colonial,” it was merely the sort of home to which the settlers had long been accustomed in their ancestral villages across the sea, and I have seen many such houses in the eastern counties of England and in Holland, giving to the foreign landscape an oddly native air. As contrasted with such Georgian mansions as were being built about the time of Adams’s birth, — as, for example, that of his future client, John Hancock, in Boston, — the type marked clearly enough the humble station and lack of wealth of the Adams family, and when in 1751, at sixteen years of age, young John began his studies at Harvard he was graded as fourteenth in a class of twenty-four, the grading being still, as was seating in church, arranged according to social position. As his grandson wrote, even this placing in the class, low as it was, was probably achieved rather from the pretensions of his maternal than his paternal ancestry. The lad, however, showed marked ability, and, when graded according to scholarship, and not social rank, stood among the first three in a rather notable class. Noticed at the Commencement exercises, in 1755, for his evident acquirements, he was at once offered the position of Latin master in the grammar school at Worcester, and about three weeks later he made the trip to his new post, sixty miles, in one day by horseback.