

SAMUEL ADAMS



THE LIFE OF AN
AMERICAN REVOLUTIONARY

JOHN K. ALEXANDER

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SAMUEL ADAMS

For my favorite historian,
June Granatir Alexander

PREFACE

Samuel Adams was a titan of America's greatest generation—the generation that achieved independence and crafted written constitutions that made the ideal of republican government a living reality in the new nation. Samuel's contemporaries, both friend and foe, understood his importance. In the fall of 1770, Stephen Sayre, an American born in New York but living in England, famously called Samuel Adams “the Father of America.” In July 1773, George Clymer, a future signer of the Declaration of Independence, met Adams in Boston. Upon returning home to Philadelphia, Clymer, having been awed by Adams's “integrity and abilities,” gushed that “all good Americans should erect a statue to him in their hearts.” Time and again as the colonists moved ever closer to the break with Great Britain, advocates of defending American rights singled out Samuel Adams for the influence he exerted. In 1780, James Warren, a fellow Massachusetts revolutionary, even extolled Samuel as “the Man who had the greatest hand in the greatest Revolution in the world.”¹

George III's supporters ruefully agreed that Samuel Adams played a pivotal role in the coming of the American War for Independence, only they usually voiced it with hatred, malice, and loathing. When the prominent Massachusetts loyalist Peter Oliver penned a lengthy description of Adams as a vile rebel, the opening lines set the tone. Oliver expressed agreement with a painter who said that, if he wanted to draw a picture of the devil, he would have Samuel Adams sit for the portrait. In the late spring of 1774, an anonymous advocate of England produced a list of evil men supposedly leading the people of Massachusetts to their ruin; Adams's name headed the list. In January 1775, the London *Gazetteer* published a letter from Boston whose author called Adams “the planner of all the measures of the rebels.” In July, the London *Morning Post* offered its readers an

extract of a letter from Rhode Island. Belittling Adams as “having nothing to lose” and hoping to gain “every thing,” the author styled him “a man properly calculated to become a consequential leader in times of anarchy.”²

Given his fame, or infamy, it is hardly surprising that, upon meeting Samuel Adams in December 1780, a French general casually observed that “everybody in Europe knows that he was one of the prime movers of the present revolution.” As important as Adams was in the coming of the revolution, it would be a mistake to focus narrowly on the years through 1776. As Samuel himself emphasized, the American Revolution involved much more than proclaiming independence and forcing Great Britain to acknowledge it. As he steadfastly asserted and worked diligently to ensure, the British had to yield the territory and rights to natural resources necessary for the new nation to prosper. For its part, the revolutionary generation had to craft governments and strive to mold societies that would make independence worth having. Samuel Adams had an important hand in those endeavors. He helped shape the influential Massachusetts constitution of 1780, and, although he was not one of the framers or even an ardent proponent of the United States Constitution of 1787, he played a central role in its adoption. Then, in the 1790s, especially as the governor of Massachusetts, he took an active part in the contentious struggle over interpreting and implementing the new national constitution. In addition, from the start of the American War for Independence onward, Adams also devoted considerable thought and effort to creating what he termed a virtuous society.

Samuel’s cousin and fellow revolutionary John Adams knew of his cousin’s expansive and pivotal role in the revolutionary era when he proclaimed that “without the true character of Samuel Adams, the true history of the American Revolution can never be written.” James Sullivan, Samuel’s old friend and oftentimes political ally, expressed a similar thought when he wrote a lengthy obituary upon Adams’s death. Saying he had produced “but a gazette sketch” of Samuel Adams, Sullivan asserted that “to give his history at length, would be to give an history of the American revolution.”³

Despite their boldness, there is much truth in the judgments John Adams and James Sullivan offered. Certainly the story of Samuel Adams, American revolutionary, compels us to think about why and how the revolution occurred; it also forces us to confront the ideas and assess the actions of those Americans who opposed the revolutionary movement. In addition, Adams’s life story reveals a great deal about how the American Revolution played out and how it influenced politics and society in late eighteenth-century America and beyond.

Notwithstanding his central role during the era of the American Revolution, scholarly interest in Samuel Adams has fluctuated dramatically, and so too have the assessments of him. In the nineteenth century, Adams was typically praised as one of the greatest heroes of the revolution; by the mid-twentieth century, he was often denigrated as a mob-leading demagogue. An occasional biography of Samuel Adams appeared in the decades that followed. But it has only been in the last few years, amid renewed interest in the era of the American Revolution—and especially interest in those typically called “the founding fathers”—that Samuel Adams has once again drawn significant attention.⁴

However they interpret him, those who study Samuel Adams must contend with the fact that eighteenth-century American English looks strange to the modern reader. In addition to British English and obsolete spellings (such as *colour*, *defence*, and *centinel*), one encounters added letters (such as *republick*), peculiar omissions (such as *observ'd*), or seemingly missing letters (such as *pressd* for *pressed*). And while writers of that era often sprinkled their prose with capital letters, the word *negro* was rarely capitalized. Still, what looks odd to the modern eye was not necessarily wrong in the eighteenth century. Accordingly, I have followed this rule: quotations are given without alteration and without any attempt to indicate “errors” through the use of *[sic]*. In the very few cases where it seemed necessary to add material for clarity’s sake, it has been inserted in brackets. These points merit special comment because in crafting this biography I have striven to allow Adams and the people who lived in his time ample opportunity to express themselves in their own words.

Long ago a wise fellow historian—my wife, June—reminded me that history is not like detective stories. There is no reason to “hide” the ending. As I hope the following pages reveal, James Sullivan was not far off the mark when he said that exploring Samuel Adams’s life at length would provide something of a history of the American Revolution. Adams was, above all else, a political being. He was a practicing and extraordinarily skillful politician. Even more important, the evidence reveals that his political life was built on a principled defense of liberty and an abiding concern for ensuring that future generations of Americans would live in a society that protected their liberties and promoted equality. As we shall see, this American revolutionary had his faults, but his life provides an example of commendable patriotism worth remembering and emulating.

This volume has its roots in my earlier biography of Samuel Adams. But while my general interpretation of Adams has not altered, this study is fundamentally different from the previous one, which had to adhere to

severe limitations on the length of the work. For this volume, I have been able to explore many topics in greater depth and delve into important aspects of Adams's life that could be only lightly touched on in the earlier book. And this publication, as any such work ideally should, contains notes. They do more than point readers to the sources on which the analysis is built. Some issues that are tangential, yet still important to the life of this American revolutionary, are discussed in the notes. In addition, a few factual errors discovered in the original work have been corrected.

Many individuals provided important encouragement and assistance as I fashioned this biography. Niels Aaboe, executive editor for political science, American history, and communication at Rowman & Littlefield, merits special thanks for actively supporting the idea of bringing out this full-life biography of Samuel Adams. As the process of transforming the manuscript into a book moved forward, the editorial and production staffs at Rowman & Littlefield provided skillful assistance in a friendly manner. They have my sincere thanks. My historian wife, June, offered sage advice and proved yet again that she is the best first reader a historian could hope for. Offering her but one page in a volume seems rather skimpy recompense. But, then, I have long believed that the most precious gift an author has to bestow is a dedication page. And it is June's now and always.

JKA

Cincinnati

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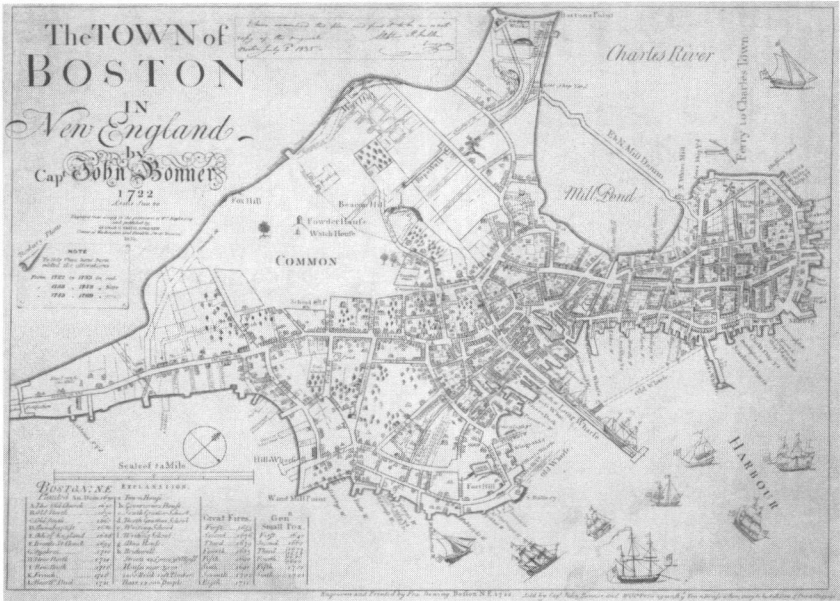
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THE FAILURE OF PROMISE

Samuel Adams was born to a life of promise. Although his merchant father lacked a gentleman's education, he had a knack for making money. In 1712, when only twenty-three years old, Samuel Adams Sr. could afford to buy a substantial parcel of land in Boston, the largest city in British America. His property extended from Belcher's Lane, which later became Purchase Street, down to the harbor. He quickly set about having an impressive dwelling erected on his land. The house, which offered an unobstructed view of the harbor and had a rooftop observatory accessible by its own stairs, stood out in what was then a semirural setting. On April 21, 1713, the senior Adams wed Mary Fifield, and they moved into the new house. As the newlyweds turned a house into a home, the property soon boasted a garden and an orchard.¹

Religion played a central role in the couple's lives. Mary Adams devoutly followed the Puritan faith, and her husband answered to the title Deacon Adams because of his lengthy service with the Old South Congregational Church. In 1715 he helped lead a successful petition effort asking the Boston Town Meeting for a parcel of land on which to erect a church. The New South Church, located just a few blocks from the Adams home, opened its doors in January 1717. Samuel Adams was baptized there on Sunday, September 16, 1722, the day of his birth.²

One can only catch glimpses of the personal side of the Adams family. What Samuel thought about his pious mother has not been preserved, but he remembered his father as "a wise man and a good man." Young Samuel's relationships with his siblings—and perhaps to a degree with his parents and especially his mother—could not help reflecting a grim demographic fact. Mary Fifield Adams bore a dozen children between 1716 and April 1740, but only three lived past their third birthday. In addition to Samuel,



"[Map of] The Town of Boston in New England by John Bonner 1722" as reprinted by George G. Smith (Boston, 1835). Courtesy of The Massachusetts Historical Society.

Mary (born in 1717) and Joseph (born in 1728) survived to adulthood. So the rigors of pregnancy and the sadness of death regularly visited the Adams home as Samuel grew up. The frightening child mortality that afflicted the family made Samuel the eldest Adams son from the day of his birth. By Samuel's own account, his sister Mary, who possessed her mother's fervent religiosity and was five years his senior, exerted an important influence on him. As a mature man, he observed that it "is a happy young man who has had an elder sister upon whom he could rely for advice and counsel in youth."³

Samuel also had reason to be happy because he grew up in an increasingly prosperous and politically influential family. The senior Adams improved the quality of his mercantile operations by acquiring a wharf, and he also owned a malt house. Through the 1720s and 1730s he purchased additional lands and houses, presumably to lease.⁴ Continuing a process begun before young Samuel's birth, the elder Adams's role in Boston's political affairs also kept expanding. In 1710 the town meeting elected him a tithingman, a post that centered on enforcing laws concerning public houses. He moved up the political ladder when he served as a constable in

1718. At that time, a constable's duties included collecting fines and taxes, responsibilities that made the post so burdensome many paid a fine to avoid the job. But Adams accepted the position. In the 1720s, the elder Adams ascended the political ladder. The town meeting routinely elected him a tax assessor, and in March 1729 he became a selectman. This executive position made him one of the leaders of the town meeting.⁵

The political rise of Samuel Adams Sr. did not happen by chance. The eighteenth-century historian Reverend William Gordon asserted that by 1724 Adams and about twenty others met in caucus and formulated strategies to get their candidates into positions of power. This organization, later called the Boston Caucus, gained political favor by championing economic issues that mattered to common folk. Because hard money was in chronically short supply, the caucus advocated the emission of paper currency. The group supported tax officials, often caucus members, who typically overlooked delinquent taxpayers suffering hard times. The caucus also strove to protect the political rights of citizens. It fought to ensure the integrity of Boston's town-meeting government, a system that gave the citizens a direct say in determining how their city functioned. The system's democratic features came at a price, though. The town meeting, which relied on elected committees rather than a few officials to set policy, often proved less than efficient, and that prompted calls for incorporating Boston as a city. Under the leadership of the caucus, the town meeting thwarted various incorporation schemes during the 1730s that would have significantly diluted the voters' power by eliminating the elected committee system.⁶ To further protect the citizens' political clout, the Boston Caucus also ardently supported the legislature's successful efforts to deny the royal governor a guaranteed salary.⁷ By the mid-1730s, as a result of being appointed a justice of the peace, the senior Adams had become Samuel Adams, Esquire.⁸

The senior Adams wanted his son to have advantages that he had not enjoyed. He and Mary, therefore, made sure young Samuel received a gentleman's education. In 1729, Samuel entered the Boston Latin School and embarked on a seven-year course of study designed to make him proficient in Latin as well as introduce him to the intricacies of Greek. During their first three years, Boston Latin students spent considerable time with the writings of Marcus Porcius Cato, the Roman statesman famous for promoting the moral integrity and simplicity of manners associated with the early Roman Republic. Aesop's *Fables*, the brief moral tales involving anthropomorphic creatures or entities such as those found in the story of "The Tortoise and the Hare," also figured prominently in the curriculum.

In the fourth year, or sooner if they showed real ability, the pupils began with Erasmus's *Colloquies*, a collection of writings of the noted Dutch scholar, theologian, and satirist. By the end of the year, they were reading the acclaimed poet Ovid's elegies about his banishment from Rome and subsequent sufferings. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was added the following year, as was Cicero's *Epistles to Atticus*. In his last two years, Samuel would have devoted much time to studying Cicero's orations and discussions of moral duties. Lucius Florus's history of the Roman Republic was also required reading. In addition, Samuel was introduced to the work of Virgil, Homer, Horace, and Isocrates as well as Justin Martyr's writings on the Old Testament.⁹

Samuel was a receptive pupil. While still at Boston Latin, he adorned one of his school books with his own youthful comments on learning being more important than wealth. And almost half a century later, Samuel still referred to lessons learned from Aesop's *Fables*. Adams also continued to demonstrate a deep interest in both the writings and history of ancient Greece and Rome. In 1780, a French visitor to Boston remarked that Adams was known, and often criticized, for "consulting his library" and supposedly "always proceeding by way of the Greeks and Romans."¹⁰

Upon graduating from the Boston Latin School, Samuel was admitted to Harvard College in 1736. In those days a Harvard undergraduate's class ranking reflected his father's attainments, not the student's performance or even his academic promise. So it is hardly surprising that this son of a wealthy justice of the peace was placed sixth in a class of twenty-three. Even that high ranking was, in fact, artificially low. Had the normal system been followed, young Samuel would have been second—not sixth—in his class. The reason for the demotion is revealing. The president of Harvard, Benjamin Wadsworth, apparently disliked the idea that the top two positions in the class would go to the sons of men who, although justices of the peace, possessed neither a gentleman's education nor other special distinctions; so Wadsworth arbitrarily decided to rank the sons of clergymen ahead of the sons of justices of the peace. Nothing in the sparse records that have survived from Samuel's youth suggests he or his parents knew about this snub. Still, the ranking process and the snub are important. They illustrate how elite members of Massachusetts society endeavored to keep social distinctions sharp. The slight in ranking Samuel reveals that wealth and even important political standing could not, in the eyes of some, transform his father into a gentleman. Deacon Adams, it seemed, lacked the proper education that marked a true Massachusetts gentleman. Attending Harvard would give young Samuel the education his father prized and also prepare

him for the ministry, the profession his parents expected him to follow. So, at the age of fourteen, which was not that uncommon for the time, Samuel began his college career.¹¹

The Harvard that young Samuel entered was as committed to producing learned gentlemen as it was to replenishing the colony's supply of clergy. The college's increasingly secular thrust is illustrated by the fact that only five of the twenty-three members of Samuel's class made the ministry their life's work.¹² And by the mid-1730s the moral fiber of the students seemed to have deteriorated. The faculty bemoaned that in recent years the undergraduates had increasingly engaged in "drinking frolicks," cursing, swearing, "shamefull scandalous Routs and Noises for sundry nights"—and worse. As a consequence, new college rules adopted shortly before Samuel enrolled stipulated that any student found guilty of such offenses could be fined and publicly admonished. Samuel never faced a fine for such shenanigans. He was, however, admonished once for sleeping late and missing morning prayers; on another occasion he was fined for "drinking prohibited Liquors."¹³

If Samuel took course work in theology to prepare for the ministry, he would have been taught by Harvard's sole professor of divinity, Edward Wigglesworth. This learned man opposed religious enthusiasm and advocated toleration rather than religious orthodoxy.¹⁴ In any case, it soon became clear that Samuel did not fancy becoming a clergyman. The ancient Greek and Latin authors and the modern political philosophers proved more appealing than theology. Perhaps it was his growing interest in politics that prompted Adams to arrange a general debate among classmates on the topic of "Liberty."¹⁵

Samuel received his bachelor's degree on schedule in 1740 and returned home to a promising, if uncertain, future.¹⁶ Having decided against the ministry, he had to choose a new career. As Adams family descendants later recounted, Samuel, urged on by his father, eagerly began studying the law; but for some unrecorded reason his mother came to oppose this course. A new plan emerged: Samuel would become a businessman. He soon found himself in a countinghouse under the tutelage of Thomas Cushing, a leading Boston merchant. Cushing quickly decided that the recent Harvard graduate was not merchant material. As Cushing reportedly saw it, young Samuel worked hard and was intelligent, but he lacked business sense, in part because politics dominated his thoughts. In an effort to jump-start his son's business career, the senior Adams loaned him £1,000, a huge sum for the time. The effort fizzled. Young Samuel loaned a friend half his start-up fund, and the friend never repaid the money. The other

£500 soon disappeared as well. In 1743, perhaps realizing the accuracy of Cushing's judgment about his son's lack of business talent, the senior Adams effectively became young Samuel's employer by making him a partner in one of the family's enterprises, a malt-house business.¹⁷

While it hardly explains the younger Adams's false career starts and failures as a fledgling businessman, Thomas Cushing may have voiced the fundamental point when he spoke of young Samuel being distracted, almost consumed, by politics. Such a preoccupation would have been natural because the political intrigues of the early 1740s were of immediate, pressing concern to all the Adamses. In fact, the Adams family found itself sucked into a political firestorm that threatened to incinerate its prosperity. To understand the formative years of Samuel Adams and why he became an American revolutionary, one must examine what was called the *land-bank controversy*.

The political turmoil sprang from a chronic problem faced by Massachusetts and the other British colonies in North America: the lack of a medium of exchange, literally an absence of money in circulation. As New England's economy grew, its money supply needed to expand. Since hard money—gold and silver—was always scarce, colonies wanted to issue paper money. However, to protect merchants who routinely advanced credit to colonial merchants, the British opposed the issuance of legal-tender paper money because of the likelihood of depreciation. Still, on occasion, chiefly during wartime, England reluctantly allowed some colonies to print currency. Massachusetts began issuing paper money in 1690, and it circulated throughout New England. Under orders from the British government, however, the many issues of Massachusetts currency, which depreciated rapidly in the 1730s, were being withdrawn from circulation. So the Massachusetts currency could not meet the region's money-supply needs.

At this juncture, Rhode Island entered the picture. Because that self-governing corporate colony was not as tightly regulated as the royal colony of Massachusetts, Rhode Island found it easier to issue paper money and in the late 1730s flooded New England with its currency. In 1738 and again the next year the Boston Town Meeting sounded the alarm in instructions sent to its representatives in the colonial assembly. The town meeting maintained that Rhode Islanders were stealing Massachusetts's trade because the Bay colony lacked a medium of exchange. The situation worsened a year later when the British government decreed that all Massachusetts paper money must be retired from circulation by 1741. Faced with what it perceived to be imminent economic ruin, the Boston Town Meeting, in instructions Deacon Adams helped draft, renewed its call for

legislative action. The Massachusetts House of Representatives responded in June 1739 with an almost plaintive cry for help. Agreeing that Massachusetts desperately needed some form of currency, the representatives established a committee to receive proposals from anyone willing to suggest how a medium of trade might be created.¹⁸

Samuel Adams Sr. did more than help write instructions for the Boston representatives. Realizing that England's prohibition against Massachusetts issuing paper currency did not extend to *private* ventures, he and other leaders of the Boston Caucus proposed creating a land bank. It issued currency and loaned it to individuals who secured the loans by mortgaging their land. The land bank was also called the *manufactory scheme* because it accepted payments in marketable items such as hemp, flax, cordage, and bar or cast iron. The land bank benefited the colony in important ways. It provided a desperately needed money supply. It was designed to promote manufacturing ventures, and that, in turn, would provide more jobs. Adams Sr. and other caucus leaders became directors of the land bank.¹⁹

Eventually over a thousand people became land-bank subscribers. The plan enjoyed widespread support, in part because virtually all landowners could subscribe and by subscribing obtain what amounted to a loan. Thus men on the rise could use the land bank to improve their economic opportunities. If Thomas Hutchinson, a prominent member of the long-established, politically powerful, and conservative merchant family, was right, the economically vulnerable found the land bank appealing. Hutchinson, who considered the idea of a land bank repugnant, claimed that "the needy part of the province in general favored the scheme." Those who actually subscribed to the land bank were, Hutchinson sniffed, not much better off. The subscribers were "generally of low condition . . . and of small estate, and many of them perhaps insolvent." Still, Hutchinson conceded that a few men "of rank and good estate" backed the endeavor. Samuel Adams Sr. would certainly belong in that more esteemed group.²⁰

Many other leading Boston merchants joined Hutchinson in recoiling at the thought that a medium of exchange would be based on something other than gold or silver. Ten merchants, headed by Edward Hutchinson, a cousin of Thomas, quickly established a bank that issued currency based on silver holdings. These merchants openly proclaimed their opposition to the land bank by announcing that no silver-bank subscriber would accept land-bank notes.

The political battle lines formed quickly. The backers of the land bank typically came from what was, over time, labeled the *popular* or *country party*. The leading Massachusetts supporters of the royal governors, often