John Adams: A Teacher’s Guide

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John Adams in the Standards

Texas §113.24.a.2 (Social Studies, Grade 8)

To support the teaching of the essential knowledge and skills, the use of a variety of rich primary and secondary source material such as the complete text of the U.S. Constitution and the Declaration of Independence; landmark cases of the U.S. Supreme Court; biographies and autobiographies; novels; speeches, letters, and diaries; and poetry, songs, and artworks is encouraged. Selections may include excerpts from the letters of John and Abigail Adams, an excerpt from the Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, and poems of the Civil War era. Motivating resources are also available from museums, historical sites, presidential libraries, and local and state preservation societies.

Texas §113.35.2.B (United States Government, Grade 12)

Analyze the contributions of the political philosophies of the Founding Fathers, including John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison, on the development of the U.S. government.
Biographical Summary

John Adams, second president of the United States, was born into a farm family of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1735. He received a formal education from Harvard College, studied law, and early on developed a reputation as a prominent lawyer. Tensions between the American English colonies and Great Britain, however, were to thrust him, sometimes begrudgingly, into roles that would mark him as one of the key figures of the American Revolution and as a central figure in the early formation of the American republic. By the time the new nation secured its independence, Adams’ travels in service to his country would take him “farther in all, both by sea and land, than any other leader of the American cause.”

Long before the Second Continental Congress made official its Declaration of Independence, Adams had developed a reputation as a leading spokesperson and staunch defender of the natural rights of the American colonists. “A Parliament of Great Britain can have no more Right to tax the Colonies, than a Parliament of Paris,” he argued during the Stamp Act crisis of 1765, for as far as Adams was concerned, such acts of Parliament were simply invalid.

In both speech and print, Adams argued forcefully against what he perceived to be British transgressions against American liberties. Yet, he would later assume the defense of those British soldiers involved in the “Boston Massacre” of 1770. Demonstrative of his courage, vanity, and selfless devotion to country, he would later refer to this case as “one of the most gallant, generous, manly and disinterested actions of my whole life, and one of the best pieces of service I ever rendered my country.” Adams’ defense of these British soldiers was a reflection of his personal integrity and sense of justice, for by this time, he had certainly lost any sympathy or loyalty for a British government he believed was becoming increasingly tyrannical. Though there is a clear debate amongst biographers as to exactly when Adams committed himself to resisting any and all Parliamentary measures aimed at the colonies, he most certainly solidified his stance well before the meeting of the First Continental Congress in 1774.

Appointed as a delegate to that First Continental Congress, he played a leading role in the independence faction and had already begun contemplating the formation of a Continental Navy. Adams would soon write the first set of rules and regulations for this new navy. Adams’ role in stressing the importance of a naval defense, a role in which he stood “second to none,” would eventually bring to him a rare moment of vindication. In 1781, while in Amsterdam,

3 McCullough, John Adams, 68.
4 John Ferling, John Adams: A Life (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 81-82.
5 James Grant, John Adams: Party of One, 140.
Adams received news of the British surrender at Yorktown; the battle had been brought to a speedy conclusion due to a show of force by a French fleet in American waters.6

It was during the Second Continental Congress, meeting in 1775, that the contribution of John Adams to American independence became indispensable. He strongly opposed the passage of the reconciliatory Olive Branch Petition to King George III and argued the case for independence long before many were ready to do so. “No one spoke more often or with greater force.”7 At one point Adams was serving on as many as 26 committees, one of those being the committee to draft the Declaration of Independence.8

That so much of what Adams contributed to the cause for independence took place within these Congresses – which were never formally recorded and intentionally shrouded in secrecy -- goes far in explaining why in the popular mind his name is often put behind the giant figures of Washington, Franklin, and Jefferson. In public, all of them showed a strong tendency to avoid acrimony and confrontation. At times, however, what is needed is someone willing to step into the ring and argue forcefully a position that carries with it great and unknown risk. John Adams was the man for the moment. When it came down to convincing those who met in Philadelphia that separation from Britain should be the fate of the colonies, “it was John Adams, more than anyone, who had made it happen.”9 Jefferson described Adams as “the pillar of its support on the floor of Congress, its ablest advocate and defender against the multifarious assaults it encountered. For many excellent persons opposed it on doubts whether we were provided sufficiently with the means of supporting it, whether the minds of our constituents were yet prepared to receive it and who, after it was decided, united zealously in the measures it called for.”10

Yet, in his personal writings, Adams often wallows in self-doubt and bemoans what he senses to be a general lack of public and professional appreciation for many of his most important accomplishments and efforts. Later in life, looking back at his days with the Second Continental Congress, he sensed that others found him to be “obnoxious.”11 In his personal letters to family and friends, Adams often engages in a style of self-deprecation that is ironic in light of his abundant service to his country. Concerning his role in the Second Continental Congress, biographer David McCullough writes, “there is only one member or eyewitness to events in Philadelphia in 1776 who wrote disparagingly of John Adams, and that was Adams writing long years afterward. As critical as he could be in his assessment of others, the man he was inclined to criticize most severely was himself. In fact, the respect he commanded at Philadelphia that spring appears to have been second to none.”12

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6 McCullough, John Adams, 99-100, 267-268.
7 McCullough, John Adams, 98.
8 McCullough, John Adams, 120.
9 McCullough, John Adams, 129.
11 McCullough, John Adams, 119-120.
12 McCullough, John Adams, 120.
Obnoxious or not, Adams helped draft the Declaration of Independence in 1776, nominated George Washington as Commander in Chief of the new Continental army, and served in France and Holland as a diplomat for the new country during the Revolution. He helped negotiate the Treaty of Paris and from 1785 to 1788 served as minister to London. Upon his return, he helped draft the Massachusetts Constitution before returning once again to Europe to serve as the ambassador to the Dutch Republic. From the Dutch he gained recognition of the United States as an independent nation, secured a much-needed loan, negotiated a treaty of amity and commerce, and established the first overseas American-owned embassy in the Netherlands. Returning home in 1788, Adams served two terms as George Washington’s vice president, the first to suffer from the dull routines of that office. In light of Adams’ energy, intelligence and hunger for recognition, it is hard to imagine how such a man survived the office. Adams bemoaned that, “my Country has in its Wisdom contrived for me, the most insignificant Office that ever the Invention of Man contrived or his Imagination conceived: and as I can do neither good nor Evil, I must be born away by Others and meet the common Fate.”\(^\text{13}\)

After the development of the nation’s first political parties, and Washington’s refusal to serve a third term, Adams was elected as the Federalist nominee for president in 1796, narrowly defeating Thomas Jefferson of the opposition Democratic-Republican Party. Because of the election rules at that time, however, Thomas Jefferson became Adams’ vice president, the only time in American history where two political opponents served in the top two executive positions.

Adams made two decisions that would seriously damage his presidency and harm his chance for a second term. First, was his decision to retain Washington’s cabinet after the election. Adams made the decision in the interest of pulling off a smooth succession, the country’s first. Adams most likely presumed that cabinet and congressional leaders would follow his own example and that of Washington before him by putting the country ahead of their own political ambitions. It soon became apparent, however, that Federalists, who generally supported Hamilton, and Jeffersonian democrats, were in no mood to work with Adams or each other. Adams’ greatest difficulties and frustrations as president were his attempts to manage and maneuver his way through the political battlefield in which these two political parties fought.

On no issue was the political disconnect between Adams, Federalists and Democrats more apparent than in deciding what America’s response should be concerning the war then being fought between Britain and France, known eventually as the “Quasi-War” in the States. Following Washington’s advice to keep the country out of European affairs, Adams was determined to resist the calls by Federalists and Democrats alike to side with either of the warring parties. He believed the best way to accomplish this was through a show of naval strength, thereby demonstrating his country’s determination to defend its shores; respond to attacks made against its own vessels, and stay clear of the conflict. Once again, Adams pressed

his long-held belief that an American navy was critical to the interests of the nation by establishing a new Department of Navy, which he would later claim was one of his proudest achievements. For Hamilton, Jefferson, and the Federalist and Democratic parties they respectively led, however, Adams’ persistent determination to avoid confrontation with either Britain or France and independently steer his own course was inexcusable and not to be forgotten.

In addition to the difficulties Adams faced by retaining most of Washington’s cabinet, biographers and historians point to a second decision made by Adams that seriously harmed his presidency and his hope for a second term. This was his failure to veto or even speak out against the passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts, which, by most accounts, were a blatant attempt by the Federalists to silence opposition and maintain their hegemony. Though there is some disagreement by Adams’ biographers as to how much responsibility Adams should shoulder for the passage and enforcement of these acts, his failure to veto or even speak out against the acts clearly harmed his political reputation.

Adams’ persistent determination to put the country ahead of his party during the Quasi-War, his desire to secure for the new republic its first smooth transfer of power by retaining Washington’s cabinet, and his acquiescence to, if not support of, the Alien and Sedition Acts, had cost him dearly. He would lose his bid for a second presidential term in the election of 1800 to Thomas Jefferson. It was a contest marked by “personal vilification surpassing any presidential election in American history.” Jefferson was branded as a Jacobin and atheist who enjoyed cohabitating with slave women. Adams was vilified as an old, addled, toothless, insane, Tory-monarchist who was “quite mad” — “an aristocrat who, if he could, would enslave the common people.”

Was there any truth behind such characterizations of Adams? Contemporaries who wished to portray the least flattering image of Adams described him as “prideful, acrimonious, rancorous, malignant and ambitions,” “a preening, vain, marble-mouthed, self-pitying, Europeanized monarchist.” Physically, his “face was round, his body was soft, his hair was thinning, and when he made an emphatic point, as he so often did, his blue eyes would bulge.” He was short-legged and veering towards fat so that, along with the accusations that he was a monarchist, earned him the nickname “His Rotundity” by those who wished to smear him.

Indeed, the two most common charges leveled against Adams’ character were that he was a monarchist and mentally unsound. To be fair, being mentally unsound was a common

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14 McCullough, John Adams, 499.
16 McCullough, John Adams, 543.
17 McCullough, John Adams, 544-545
18 Grant, John Adams: Party of One, 126-356
19 Grant, John Adams: Party of One, 250.
20 McCullough, John Adams, 408.
21 McCullough, John Adams, 433.
charge aimed at Adams by those who stringently disagreed with the man and his views. Just as often, he was admired for his intelligence, wit and rhetorical skills. Adams did, however, tend to lose his temper, especially under stress. Abigail Adams, who knew the man like no other, saw in her husband but a single flaw, what she called his irritability. He could be cold and at times intentionally offensive, “treating well-wishers in a contemptible and uncivil manner.”

As for Adams being a monarchist, there is certainly evidence to suggest that he had serious concerns about how much democracy the new nation could withstand. In an early essay written in 1763, Adams portends a political viewpoint he would hold throughout his life, in which the reigning in of democracy through a system of checks and balances was paramount: “No simple Form of Government, can possibly secure Men against the Violences of Power. Simple Monarchy will soon mould itself into Despotism, Aristocracy will soon commence an Oligarchy, and Democracy, will soon degenerate into an Anarchy, such an Anarchy that every Man will do what is right in his own Eyes, and no Mans life or property or Reputation of Liberty will be secure and every one of these will soon mould itself into a system of subordination of all the moral Virtues, and Intellectual Abilities, all the Powers of Wealth, Beauty, Wit, and Science, to the wanton Pleasures, the capricious Will, and the execrable Cruelty of one of a very few.”

Read carefully, one might justifiably deem Adams a conservative; he was certainly to the right of Jefferson, but his concern rested upon the excess power that any group might wield, whether by a monarch or “the people.” Less than three decades later, Edmund Burke would voice similar concerns, albeit with much more urgency, as the French Revolution went through its radical democratic phase and displayed the very excesses and consequences that Adams warned of. Dismissing Adams as a “Europeanized monarch” was a gross and unfair simplification of the man, his actions, and beliefs. Biographer James Grant makes a poignant argument: “Adams, alleged monarchist and Francophobe, was a farmer who mixed his own manure and, as president, faced down the Federalist war party. This is not to deny that Adams was a man of the right. He believed that human beings were fallen and fallible and that balanced government was necessary to prevent the social classes from devouring one another. He believed that pure democracy presented no net improvement over absolute monarchy.”

John Adams was as impeccably honest as he was blunt. He was deficient in the kind of small talk that a Benjamin Franklin might easily engage in order to make friends and influence people. His constitution alone, unlike Washington, failed to command respect. Though he was lacking in the social cosmetics that one might expect to find in a diplomat, he had a sharp, analytical mind, backed by powerfully persuasive rhetorical skill. His courage and tenacity in both words and deeds cannot but humble the reader who follows the story of his life. The same can be said of Abigail, whose equally strong opinions and strength and force of character became the stabilizing force in her husband’s life. Abigail faced incomprehensible challenges

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22 McCullough, John Adams, 519.
23 Ferling, John Adams: A Life, 381.
25 Grant, John Adams: Party of One, 360.
and struggles as she dedicated herself to a man whose sense of duty and devotion to country kept them apart for years at a time. With Abigail’s unflinching support, her “dearest friend,” as she often addressed him in letters, was an indispensable gift to a young nation struggling for its identity and survival.
Interpretations Over Time

Posterity! You will never know, how much it cost the present Generation, to preserve your Freedom! I hope you will make a good Use of it. If you do not I shall repent in Heaven, that I ever took half the Pains to preserve it. ~John Adams to Abigail Adams, 26 April 1777

John Adams, like all of the leading figures of the American Revolution, was preoccupied with the image he would leave to posterity. In most circles, and with few exceptions, the popular images of Washington and Franklin have persistently tended to hover near mythical proportions. Other figures of the American Revolution, such as Hamilton and Jefferson, have gone through various permutations in both scholarly and popular perceptions, depending on the questions or concerns raised within the socio-historical climate of any particular period.

Concerning this regard for posterity, Adams was the most honest and candid of them all. John Adams could never keep his mouth shut, a helpful quality when trying to persuade others to move forward with a revolution, but maybe less so when trying to mold an enduring, popular image. In a letter to Benjamin Rush in 1790, the temper, jealous vanity, and piercing wit of Adams spew forth: “The History of our Revolution will be one continued Lye from one End to the other. The Essence of the whole will be that Dr. Franklins electrical Rod, Smote the Earth and out Sprung General Washington. That Franklin electrified him with his Rod---and thence forward these two conducted all the Policy Negotiations Legislation and War.”27 Painfully aware of the back seat he was taking to other leading figures of the Revolution, forced later in life to accept his single term as president while being chronologically straddled on either side with the two-term presidencies of Washington and Jefferson, Adams found his secondary status a hard pill to swallow.

Washington and Jefferson, also, demonstrated a keen awareness of their time and place in history and of the enduring impression their words and actions would leave behind. They, however, revealed little of their private selves in writings and spoke cautiously and carefully in public. John Adams was the first to admit that he lacked such quiet, self-control. In his darker moments, he wallowed in self-doubt and bitterly resented what he perceived to be a disregard for his work and sacrifice to the country. Though Adams might have lacked the characteristics that would endear him to his contemporaries, however, later historians would show more appreciation. As writer Alan Taylor explains, “the same qualities of biting honesty, prolix writing,


and determined independence that so offended colleagues have endeared Adams to scholars. They delight in his vivid quotations, exhaustive documentation, and utter inability to hide his feelings or cover his tracks. He is such a remarkably instructive and cooperative historical source precisely because he was so difficult for most of his contemporaries to work with.  

In his time, however, Adams might have been pushed even further back into the shadows had it not been for a rather bewitching event that took place on July 4th, 1826. On this day, the odd and intriguing coincidental deaths of both Adams and Jefferson, only hours apart, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, helped to convince many Americans that the near simultaneous deaths of the two was a sign of providence. This most assuredly helped secure Adams’ placement among the pantheon of “Greats” than might otherwise have been the case.

Beginning in the 1820’s, a more secure and thriving republic had come into existence. Having survived the rather virulent animosity that had characterized the struggle between the Federalists and Democrats in the earliest days of the republic, and having birthed their way through the cataclysms and uncertainties of the American Revolution and the War of 1812, Americans began to mythologize the Founding Fathers. Something very close to a secular religion had developed, establishing the founding fathers as the harbingers of a nation destined for greatness. Not all, however, agreed with the secular mythology. Nineteenth-century abolitionists, feminists, and Populists criticized the Constitution and its framers for failing to live up to the highest principles framed in the Declaration; the institution of slavery was left intact, women were still denied political and social parity, and economic inequalities abound. The year 1913 was a turning point, however, when Charles A. Beard published his book, An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution. In this work, Beard leveled his accusation that the framers of the U.S. Constitution had been more concerned about protecting their financial interests than in defending the liberties of the people.  

Though most of what Beard argued in his book was plain and factual, he had touched a sensitive nerve with the public, and many were not impressed. Soon, other writers began to join in the chorus of challenging long held beliefs and cherished descriptions of the founding fathers, so much, that to many it soon seemed that the debunking of sacred cows had turned into a sport.

For those susceptible to the post-war gloom of the 1920’s, the criticisms of the founding fathers broadened to include an attack on the West in general. Western civilization, they argued, was a civilization built on greed, selfishness, materialism, and a business model that stressed conformity to the point of killing the human imagination. The beginning point for such criticisms and blame tended eventually to fall on those primarily responsible for enshrining this mess into the U.S. Constitution. According to the writer, D.H. Lawrence, Franklin, rather than ensuring the liberty of the people by signing the Declaration of Independence and Constitution--along with his do-good moralizing on character---had instead enslaved its soul. The poet,

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William Carlos Williams, echoed such sentiments; rather than mythologizing a founding father, he chose instead to worship Aaron Burr, the only man to have actually killed a founding father!

Where is John Adams during this phase of historical debunking? Moreover, where in point was Adams throughout the long course of post-revolutionary history when the populists, feminists and socialists were aiming their criticisms at the founding fathers, before and after Beard’s book? The critical pages are rather silent when it comes to Adams. In part, his secondary status might explain why he has often escaped the kind of criticism or debunking more often aimed at others. A larger part of the reason might be how he lived his life. In light of the ideals put forth in the Declaration, it is understandable why some might find hypocritical fault in Washington and Jefferson, for example, for being wealthy, aristocratic slaveholders. Adams was none of these. He neither was born into wealth nor was he a slaveholder, nor did he father any children of slaves, and though he was no dedicated abolitionist, he makes clear in his writings that he and Abigail abhorred the institution of slavery. Unlike Jefferson’s expensive tastes and financial difficulties, demonstrated by his spending sprees while in Europe and the large debt he had incurred by the time of his death, Adams was frugal and stayed clear of debt all his life. It is hard to make a Beard-like argument against Adams when, at least during the early years of the revolution, his sense of duty caused his family to be steered more toward financial desperation than security. Before the revolution, Adams had established through his law practice a fairly secure and comfortable income. He risked it all by throwing himself into the revolutionary struggle. Adams was one of the few leading figures of the revolution that was not born into wealth, and he would never accumulate much material wealth during his lifetime. What he had, he had earned. He then risked it all, and then, mostly through frugality and sacrifice, managed to build a modest though respectable fortune by the time of his death.

Finally, it might be noted that Adams was not present at the signing of the Constitution (his diplomatic duties had kept him in Europe at the time). Therefore, ignoring for the moment the general public criticisms and instead focusing primarily on Beard’s analysis, his general criticism was aimed primarily upon the framers of the Constitution who had been there to debate and sign the document. This too could have worked out to the benefit of Adams’ image and helped sheltered him from the public effects resulting from Beard’s analysis.

In 1950, a “documentary-editing revolution” occurred with the release of The Papers of Thomas Jefferson. It was now possible to access precise transcriptions of the widest possible range of primary source documents on published subjects. When Harvard University Press released the Diary and Autobiography of John Adams in 1961 (the first installment of the project known as the Adams Papers) there was a surge in interest and popular acclaim for Adams. Earlier in 1956, John F. Kennedy had published Profiles in Courage, in which an entire chapter was devoted to the son of John Adams, John Quincy, as an example of courageous leaders who had helped guide the nation throughout its history. Kennedy alluded to the elderly Adams

31 Steven H. Jaffe, Who Were the Founding Fathers? 122-123.
several times, however, including the selfless risks he had taken in defending the British soldiers at the Boston Massacre, and the reassurances he had given to his son who was attempting, like his father before him, to rise above politics and steer his own course as he faced virulent attacks from both political parties.\textsuperscript{35} A widely read book, Profiles in Courage no doubt helped once again to give a more positive polish to the Adams name in the eyes of the public. As popular as Kennedy, and therefore his book would eventually become, John Adams would have received great satisfaction in reading the passage that credited him as “surely as disinterested as well as wise a public servant as we ever had.”\textsuperscript{36} 

In 1969, the Tony award winning Broadway play, 1776, in which Adams was a leading, central character, began a run of three years, followed up by a film version in 1971. Both of these productions focused on the courage Adams displayed in his political life and, in his private life, his devotion to Abigail. In 1976, the thirteen-part series, The Adams Chronicles, portrayed the accomplishments and trials of both Adams and his son and protégé, John Quincy. In 2008, Home Box Office (HBO) featured the life of John Adams once again in a superbly produced eight-hour miniseries.

All of these productions and publications of the last half-century have helped bring John Adams out from the historical shadows and into a more public light. Not only do many Americans have a less politically charged, honest and truer understanding of the man, they actually like him, respect him, and now understand more fully his sacrifice to the country. Next to knowing that the republic had survived and prospered, nothing would have pleased him more.


\textsuperscript{36} John F. Kennedy, Profiles in Courage, 218.
Recommendations for Teachers

Lesson Plans

CNNfyi. Lesson plan on John Adams for grades 9-12. This lesson focuses upon Adams’ role in the First Continental Congress. Students examine the similarities and differences between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson and why Adams is sometimes overlooked. Students then write arguments about why he is worthy of recognition. Supplemental reading materials are provided.
Full text available online

The Educator’s Reference Desk. Lesson plan on the Boston Massacre for grades 9-12. This lesson asks students to make critical interpretations of Paul Revere’s engraving of the Boston Massacre and examine the role of propaganda in the American Revolution.
Full text available online

Gavel to Gavel. Lesson plans on government, grades 4-12. Though this site focuses primarily on fostering interest and participation in Alaskan state government, its Unit One lesson plans offer a broad examination of key principles of republicanism. In addition to treating why the founding fathers chose a republican form of government, coverage is extended to the key terms for citizens in a democracy, civic virtue and the common welfare, and role of government and authority.
Full text available online

Smithsonian Education. Lesson plans for all grade levels and subjects. Lesson Plans in all subject areas tied to the standards in all 50 states. Though this site currently has no lesson plans with a strong enough connection to John Adams, this is a must lesson plan site for all teachers. Its database is easily searchable by state, grade, and subject. Each lesson plan, when relevant, is linked to standards in all 50 states.
Full text available online

Places to Visit

Adams National Historical Park, Quincy, Massachusetts
This park contains the history of four generations of the Adams family (from 1720 to 1927), including the birthplaces of both John and Quincy Adams. “Old House” is located here on the family plot that Adams named Peacefield, home to four generations of the Adams family. There is also a physical library containing more than 14,000 historical volumes. The link to the website contains a nice collection of pictures that can also be viewed as a slide show, as well as short descriptions of the Adams family members and places of significance.
Full text available online
Websites

HBO. John Adams. Companion website to the T.V. miniseries that was originally aired on HBO. This site contains a variety of interactive activities and readings that supplement the film, including a synopsis of each episode. There is a teacher’s guide that can be used online or downloaded in pdf format. A variety of multi-media activities are also available for classroom use.

Full text available online

The Miller Center of Public Affairs. University of Virginia.
A nice starting point for a study of Adams. Includes a brief biography, transcripts of some of his most famous speeches, and a selection of short and highly readable essays on Adams and his administration that can be used in the classroom. There is a good bibliography here for those interested in a more in depth study of Adams.

Full text available online

Presidents of the United States. A portal website of the U.S. Presidents and the US Presidency. Information is alphabetized by both name and subject headings, offering a quick and easy way to look up a plethora of information about all of the U.S. presidents. A good starting point for students wanting to know where to look to find more information on a president, whether it be a bibliography, his medical conditions, or the name of his pet.

Full text available online

PBS. American Experience: John and Abigail Adams. Companion website to the PBS film, John and Abigail Adams, part of the American Experience series. This site contains a large and impressive variety of interactive activities and readings that supplement the film, though there is so much here that can be used as stand-alone material for teaching the American Revolution: maps, timelines, topic coverage, etc. A complete transcript of the film is also available.

Full text available online

Additional Resources

Film:

American Experience: John and Abigail Adams. PBS. (120 min., closed captioned).
This film dramatizes the relationship between John and Abigail Adams, with the American Revolutionary experience serving as the backdrop. A well done narrated documentary and the shortest in length of the films listed here.
John Adams. HBO. (501 min. in 7 episodes).
A superbly produced film that is brilliantly written, acted and directed. This seven part mini-series is the best to be found on John and Abigail Adams, though its length would obviously require extensive editing for use in the classroom. It weaves events of the American Revolution, with all of the expected big character names present, into the more intimate story of the Adams family members. Many, many, unforgettable scenes. Catch the first truly believable portrayal of George Washington as he is portrayed by actor David Morse. Paul Giamatti and Laura Linney give unforgettable performances as John and Abigail Adams.

1776. Columbia Pictures (142 min / 168 min (director's cut)).
Adapted from the original play by Sherman Edwards and Peter Stone. This is a musical focusing on the events leading up to the singing of the Declaration of Independence. John and Abigail Adams, Franklin, and Jefferson are all portrayed here. A great film to introduce to your students the genre of musicals, which many have probably never been exposed to (although the recent release of Sweeney Todd went far in correcting that deficiency). Adams is portrayed here as a frustrated character disliked by all in the Congress due to his long rants and frustration in convincing them to take action and move forward. In the opening number, his Congressional colleagues are found singing in chorus, “Sit down, John!” The tender relationship between John and Abigail is warmly portrayed.
Select Annotated Bibliography

Primary Source Materials


The diary and autobiography of John Adams in book form. The *Diary* was written during the early days of the Revolutionary resistance in New England and covers the debates in the Continental Congresses, and Adams’ diplomacy while overseas. Only its length, one supposes, has kept this from becoming an American classic. There is much historical value here as well as to offer a panoramic view of the Adams personality. The *Autobiography*, was never finished but covers his childhood, his legal and political career, the move toward independence and finally his diplomatic experiences.


This massive project, still in progress, contains much of what will eventually be a comprehensive edition of the manuscripts written and received by the family of John Adams. His diaries, autobiography, and letters to and from Abigail are currently available, along with many legal and government documents.

*Full text available online*


This single volume work contains a selection of 289 letters written between John and Abigail Adams from 1762 to 1801. Transcribed from the original manuscripts, the letters show both the consistency as well as the evolution of their relationship during this era. Spellings have been retained and the writing is not modernized, thus retaining for the reader the style of eighteenth century writing. They are still highly readable, however.

The Miller Center of Public Affairs. University of Virginia.

A nice starting point for a study of Adams. Includes a brief biography, transcripts of some of his most famous speeches, and a selection of short and highly readable essays on Adams and his administration that can be used in the classroom. There is a good bibliography here for those interested in a more in depth study of Adams.

*Full text available online*


A nice, highly selective collection of Adams’ political writings. A good starting point for understanding Adams’ political views without becoming lost in the massive amount of material he wrote on the subject. Its slim, 200 pages offers the reader a good overview of Adams’ methodology as a political theorist. Included here are pre-revolutionary
writings, thoughts on government, the Constitution of Massachusetts of 1780, and a defense of the Constitution.

Full-length Biographies

This was the definitive Adams biography at the time of its release. Ferling’s book portrays a complex character and forcefully argues that Adams is unfairly identified as a peripheral figure in the American Revolution. He does much here to set the record straight.

Grant’s book, the latest of those biographies listed here, places most of the focus upon Adams’ service during the Revolutionary period. It is possibly the most straightforward, academic read. Grant does not hesitate to zoom in on the flaws of Adams, his anti-Catholicism in particular, which is something overlooked in the other biographies listed here.

McCullough’s book is the easiest read of the biographies listed here. His admiration for Adams is clear, for even when he points out the flaws of his hero, he manages to convince the reader that Adams was, indeed, a great, though flawed, human being. McCullough brings out a character that is complicated, rare, and believable. Adams as statesman as well as husband and father are masterfully portrayed.

The earliest of the biographies listed here. Smith was one of the first to make use of the first release of the Adams Papers. Lengthy and lacking in criticism, Smith’s two-volume work is nevertheless a nice piece of reference to have on hand for researching some of the more particular details on the life of Adams.

Article- or Chapter-length Biographical Sketches

This work provides 10 to 20 page biographies of all of the U.S. Presidents. The essays are masterfully written and scholarly but never tedious. Includes a highly selective annotated bibliography for further reading on the presidents.

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This is an old book apparently written for use in classrooms around the turn of the previous century. Not necessarily, an exciting or highly readable book for today’s junior readers, its value lies primarily in providing examples of how Adams was used as a role model for young readers during this period. There is little analysis and no criticism of Adams to be found here, but rather, a glorification of Adams as a great man. Its appendix in particular offers some interesting insights into what the early American classroom was like.
About the Author

Chris Todar was born in El Paso, Texas, and has resided there most of his life. He graduated from Coronado High School and from the University of Texas at El Paso with a bachelor’s degree in history and a master’s degree in Sociology. He teaches U.S. history, world history, and sociology at Austin High school in El Paso. Apart from his teaching and scholarly interests, he is a songwriter and musician who performs and records with the musical duet Krisinger. He dreams one day of being able to perform a jam on the top of Machu Picchu.