

The Foundation for American Christian Education

Transforming the heart and mind of a nation



THE EDUCATION OF JOHN QUINCY ADAMS THE CHARACTER FOR A CHRISTIAN REPUBLIC

A COLONIAL EDUCATION IN LEADING IDEAS

One of the most critical changes we have witnessed in American education has been the change away from the reasoning, writing, reflecting ability so prominent in the generations that produced the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States of America, the Monroe Doctrine and other documents. This ability to define a philosophy of government in writing was the result of a colonial education in principles, leading ideas and their application to the field of civil government—America’s unique contribution.

Modern scholarship informs us that the literacy level of the American colonists at the time of the American Revolution, was the highest ever achieved in the world. Thus, it is not surprising that the American State Papers would reflect this extension of the blessings of liberty. But what is perhaps more astonishing to secular scholars is the degree to which this education reflected the Biblical knowledge of our Founding Fathers and Mothers.

From the coming of the Pilgrims with the Geneva Bible, the application of Biblical reasoning to civil government had confirmed the Gospel purpose of America. The *Mayflower Compact* was not only a document of government, it was a profession of Christian faith. For more than one hundred fifty years the clergy continued to provide leadership by preaching and teaching the Biblical principles of government from the pulpit, and in their election sermons at the seats of colonial civil government. Thus the Word of God became the American Political textbook.

Above all, the colonists were acquainted with the Bible itself, principally in the Geneva Version but increasingly in the King James Version. The Bible was read and recited, quoted and consulted, early committed to memory and constantly searched for meaning. Deemed universally relevant, it remained throughout the century the single most important cultural influence in the lives of Anglo-Americans....

Though the Bible had been richly valued for generations, it was not until the seventeenth century that it was widely read and studied. The message of Protestantism was that men could find in Scripture the means to salvation, the keys to good and evil, the rules by which to live, and the standards against which to measure the conduct of prince and pastor.*

We have chosen to examine the education of John Quincy Adams of the generation following those who established the nation. John Adams contributed to the writing and adopting of the Declaration of Independence, to the diplomacy of the American Revolution and to the American presidency during its first two administrations. His son, John Quincy Adams, continued the stewardship of American government and gave more than half a century to the service of his country.

We are indebted to the consistency of our early statesmen in the faithful recording of their application of a philosophy of government in their letters, diaries, journals and published papers. It is these records which will trace the influences which shaped the mind and character of young John Quincy Adams—preparing him with a character to support a Christian Republic.

HOME, THE FIRST SPHERE OF GOVERNMENT

The year 1767 was notable in New England for two events—the beginning of the efforts of the British Ministry to raise revenue from America in the imposition of the Townshend Acts, and the birth of John Quincy Adams. Events were moving in rapid sequence to bring about a permanent separation between Great Britain and her American Colonies and young John Quincy Adams was to witness many of the sights and sounds of this unfolding history. When he was six, Boston became the first city to dispose of the fatally taxed tea. The Boston Port blockade which followed struck a note of warning throughout the colonies. It also brought them together again into a representative fellowship in the First Continental Congress. The boy saw his father depart for Philadelphia as an elected delegate from Massachusetts. That spring he stood by his mother's side, an eight year old, startled by the huge bursts of cannon from the British fleet reducing Charlestown to ashes, while patriots on Bunker's Hill retreated after taking devastating toll of British regulars.

But the young lad was no passive spectator of events. Braintree, the home town of the Adams family, was ten miles from Boston. John Quincy made this trip daily to bring news to his mother on the farm. He felt deeply the challenges to colonial liberty, and he was drawn irresistibly to an individual concern and consciousness of responsibility. Braintree was located close enough to Boston for many to seek refuge from the British occupation of that town. So the Adams' family farm became a center of news and hospitality. There was a sense of urgency in the air. Supplies for the newly created Continental army were needed and ammunition was precious. Even his mother's pewter spoons were surrendered for bullets. "I well recollect going into the kitchen and seeing some of the men engaged in running those spoons into bullets for the use of the troops. Do you wonder that a boy of seven years of age, who witnessed this scene, should be a patriot?"

Danger from enemy troops was always present and Johnny learned to drill with the local militia. But he also learned to dig and hoe in the fields with his brothers and sister to help

* *American Education, The Colonial Experience 1607–1683* by Lawrence A. Cremin, Harper and Row, Publishers, 1970, page 40.

Mamma harvest the crops. Like his father before him he learned the chores of tending cattle, chopping kindling and performing other duties of farm life.

His mother, Abigail Adams, had accepted the responsibility for keeping up the education of her children—especially of her oldest son, John Quincy Adams, in the absence of his father. First came instruction in the Word of God. So well did his mother commit the Word to young John Quincy's heart that it became for him both compass and anchor in a long life of service.

From his mother he was also led into the love and inspiration of literature. He learned the poetry of Pope, read the plays of Shakespeare, struggled with Milton, and generally devoured the family library. He listened to his mother's talk of the economic concerns of the war. She strove valiantly to keep up the spirits of the little family in the absence of Papa. John Quincy responded to his mother's dependence upon him with a manliness which became characteristic. Duty and service were both engrained in his parents. He learned much from their example and personal conduct. His father felt very strongly about the qualities of Christian character needed for that representative form of government which the American colonies would adopt. Writing to their friend and neighbor, Mercy Warren, he had defined it thus:

The Form of Government, which you admire, when its Principles are pure is admirable, indeed, it is productive of every Thing, which is great and excellent among Men. But its Principles are as easily destroyed, as human Nature is corrupted. Such a government is only to be supported by pure Religion or Austere Morals. Public Virtue cannot exist in a Nation without private, and public Virtue is the only Foundation of Republics. There must be a positive Passion for the public good, the public Interest, Honour, Power and Glory, established in the Minds of the People, or there can be no Republican Government, nor any real Liberty: and this public Passion must be Superiour to all private Passions. Men must be ready, they must pride themselves, and be happy to sacrifice their private Pleasures, Passions and Interests, nay, their private Friendships and dearest Connections, when they stand in Competition with the Rights of Society...*

In addition to his studies in the Bible and his reading in the family library, Abigail Adams directed John Quincy's thoughts towards a knowledge of history. History was a passion with John Adams, and Abigail wanted to deepen her own knowledge in the absence of her partner. The months and years of her husband's absence needed buttressing with subjects of worthy contemplation so that her thoughts might not disintegrate into loneliness, fear or despair. She wrote, "I have taken a very great fondness for reading Rollin's *Ancient History* since you left me. I am determined to go through with it, if possible, in these, my days of solitude. I find great pleasure and entertainment from it, and I have persuaded Johnny to read me a page or two every day and hope he will, for his desire to oblige me, entertain a fondness for it."

HISTORY WITH A CHRISTIAN PURPOSE

The study of history has a Christian purpose and fulfillment, and Charles Rollin, born in 1661, whose work on *Ancient History* was completed in 1730, defined it in these words:

**Warren-Adams Letters*, Vol. I, 1743–1777, The Massachusetts Historical Society, 1917, page 222.

The study of profane history would little deserve to have a serious attention, and a considerable length of time bestowed upon it, if it were confined to the bare knowledge of ancient transactions, and an uninteresting inquiry into the eras when each of them happened. It little concerns us to know, that there were once such men as Alexander, Caesar, Aristides, or Cato, and that they lived in this or that period; that the empire of the Assyrians made way for that of the Babylonians, and the latter for the empire of the Medes and Persians, who were themselves subjected by the Macedonians, as these were afterwards by the Romans.

But it highly concerns us to know by what methods those empires were founded; by what steps they rose to that exalted pitch of grandeur which we so much admire; what it was that constituted their true glory and felicity; and what were the causes of their declension and fall.

It is of no less importance to study attentively the manners of different nations; their genius, laws, and customs; and especially to acquaint ourselves with the character and disposition, the talents, virtues, and even vices, of those by whom they were governed; and whose good or bad qualities contributed to the grandeur or decay of the states over which they presided.

Such are the great objects which ancient history presents; causing to pass, as it were, in review before us, all the kingdoms and empires of the world; and at the same time, all the great men who were any ways conspicuous; thereby instructing us, by example rather than by precept, in the arts of empire and war, the principles of government, the rules of policy, the maxims of civil society, and the conduct of life that suits all ages and conditions....

But another object of infinitely greater importance, claims our attention. For although profane history treats only of nations who had imbibed all the absurdities of a superstitious worship: and abandoned themselves to all the irregularities of which human nature, after the fall of the first man, became capable; it nevertheless proclaims universally the greatness of the Almighty, his power, his justice, and, above all, the admirable wisdom with which His Providence governs the universe.

If the inherent conviction of this last truth raised, according to Cicero's observation, the Romans above all other nations; we may, in like manner, affirm, that nothing gives history a greater superiority to many branches of literature, than to see in a manner imprinted, in almost every page of it, the precious footsteps and shining proofs of this great truth, *viz.* that God disposes all events as supreme Lord and Sovereign; that he alone determines the fate of kings and the duration of empires; and that he transfers the government of kingdoms from one nation to another because of the unrighteous dealings and wickedness committed therein.”*

No doubt Johnny enjoyed reading from Rollin the story of Alexander the Great breaking the ungovernable horse which had been given as a gift to his ambitious father, Philip. But no one dared mount the fierce war horse. In a dramatic scene young Alexander turned the horse's head to the sun, away from his shadow which had frightened him. Then, leaping upon his back, Alexander displayed a remarkable skill in working with the horse until he was tamed. But in the discussion following this story of the world's youngest conqueror, Johnny must have learned of

**Ancient History* by Charles Rollin, 1842, Harper Brothers, Preface.

the sad death at 33 of this spirited, passionate man. He could lead conquering armies, but he was not able to govern himself and he died a victim of his own ungovernable passions and sins.

Such an approach to history coincided with the entire education of John Quincy Adams. It put the responsibility for the rise and fall of nations upon the character and conduct of its people and rulers. It made all the more remarkable the Christian era with its westward course, awaiting that moment in history when all the elements were ready for the establishment of the world's first Christian republic. Even as John and Abigail Adams contributed to the founding period of this republic so would their son, John Quincy Adams, perpetuate and extend their vision of Christian leadership and responsibility for civil government.

LEARNING TO WRITE DOWN HIS OBSERVATIONS

The tender years of companionship with his mother were a touchstone to the life and character of John Quincy Adams. In later years he recalled leaping out of bed in the morning after saying his prayers, repeating with spirit the first lines from one of his mother's favorite poems, William Collins' ode to the patriot warriors of Scotland who fell in battle:

How sleep the brave who sink to rest,
By all their country's wishes blest....

When about ten years of age, John Quincy Adams began the habit of writing. As Abigail figured her accounts of the farm, sewed by the fireside or encouraged the younger brothers and sister in their lessons, Johnny wrote to his father to review his character development and education and to ask for parental instruction. It is a unique commentary on his first ten years of living:

Braintree, June the 2d, 1777

Dear Sir,

I love to receive letters very well, much better than I love to write them. I make but a poor figure at composition; my head is much too fickle. My thoughts are running after birds'-eggs, play, and trifles, till I get vexed with myself. Mamma has a troublesome task to keep me steady, and I own I am ashamed of myself. I have but just entered the third volume of Smollett, though I had designed to have got half through it by this time. I have determined this week to be more diligent, as Mr. Thaxter will be absent at court, and I can not pursue my other studies. I have set myself a stint, and determine to read the third volume half out. If I can but keep my resolution I will write again at the end of the week, and give a better account of myself. I wish, sir, you would give me some instructions with regard to my time, and advise me how to proportion my studies and my play, in writing, and I will keep them by me and endeavor to follow them. I am, dear sir, with a present determination of growing better,

Yours,
JOHN QUINCY ADAMS

P.S.—Sir, if you will be so good as to favor me with a blank-book I will transcribe the most remarkable occurrences I meet with in my reading, which will serve to fix them upon my mind.*

Ten years at home were all the years that John Quincy Adams was to spend in close association with his beloved mother, Abigail Adams. But these first ten years were the foundation stones of his life, so consistently had precept been impressed by parental example. In the summer of 1777 John Adams had returned to Braintree full of expectations that he could now resume his provincial life in Massachusetts. But his talents were to be called into a larger sphere of service for the struggling new nation. Once again he made ready to depart for Europe. This time he took with him 11-year old John Quincy Adams. Despite the warm and affectionate companionship between mother and son each accepted the responsibility of the decision. Convinced that Johnny could be of service to his father, and knowing that the boy would profit by a closer association with the older Adams, Abigail relinquished him, though not without a keen realization of what his departure would mean to her personally. Yet, as one of New England's most accomplished correspondents she utilized her letters to her son to continue the education so well begun at Braintree. Through these letters she continued to keep before his eyes the spiritual and moral demands upon his life. Though separated by thousands of miles—sometimes for years at a time, this mother and son enjoyed a mutual devotion to Christian principles and Christian character. "The child is father of the man" and the new nation would have no better representative of its Christian character than in the life and service of John Quincy Adams.

But it was John Adams who first reassured the anxious mother that her young eaglet was ready to leave the nest. As he embarked on his mission as American Commissioner to France, he wrote to his wife on the eve of embarkation this tender message:

Uncle Quincy's—
13 February, 1778

DEAREST OF FRIENDS,

I had not been twenty minutes in this house, before I had the happiness to see Captain Tucker and a midshipman coming for me. We will be soon on board, and may God prosper our voyage in every stage of it as much as at the beginning, and send to you, my dear children, and all my friends, the choicest blessings!

So wishes and prays yours, with an ardor that neither absence, nor any other event can abate,

JOHN ADAMS

P.S. Johnny sends his duty to his mamma, and his love to his sisters and brothers. He behaves like a man.†

John Adams was devoted to the education of his children. His thoughts were expressed many times in his correspondence to Mrs. Adams:

**History of the Life, Administration, and Times of John Quincy Adams, Sixth President of the United States*, by John Robert Irelan, 1887, page 16.

†*Life and Public Services of John Quincy Adams* by William H. Seward, 1849, page 31.

Human nature, with all its infirmities and depravation, is still capable of great things. It is capable of attaining to degrees of wisdom and of goodness which we have reason to believe appear respectable in the estimation of superior intelligences. Education makes a greater difference between man and man, than nature has made between man and brute. The virtues and powers to which men may be trained, by early education and constant discipline, are truly sublime and astonishing. Newton and Locke are examples of the deep sagacity which may be acquired by long habits of thinking and study....

It should be your care therefore, and mine, to elevate the minds of our children, and exalt their courage, to accelerate and animate their industry and activity, to excite in them an habitual contempt of meanness, abhorrence of injustice and inhumanity, and an ambition to excel in every capacity, faculty, and virtue. If we suffer their minds to grovel and creep in infancy, they will grovel and creep all their lives.

But their bodies must be hardened, as well as their souls exalted. Without strength, and activity and vigor of body, the brightest mental excellencies will be eclipsed and obscured.*

Arrived in France and greeted warmly by Benjamin Franklin, John Adams placed his son in a private boarding school in Passy, just outside Paris. Here he found American schoolmates—the two grandsons of Benjamin Franklin, the son of Silas Deane, Jesse Deane, and Charles Cochran of South Carolina. Johnny’s progress in Latin, but especially in French, was noteworthy. On weekends his father took him to visit the Cathedral de Notre Dame, he walked the crooked streets of Paris, and climbed to the top of Montmartre. He walked along the banks of the Seine, and watched children play simple French classics in the Theatre des Petit Comediens in the Bois de Boulogne. Life was full of delightful sights and sounds and there was much to observe.

One only of Abigail’s letters to her son can be given here but it is indicative of the quality of her continuing education of John Quincy Adams:

June, 1778

MY DEAR SON,

’Tis almost four months since you left your native land, and embarked upon the mighty waters, in quest of a foreign country. Although I have not particularly written to you since, yet you may be assured you have constantly been upon my heart and mind.

It is a very difficult task, my dear son, for a tender parent to bring her mind to part with a child of your years going to a distant land; nor could I have acquiesced in such a separation under any other care than that of the most excellent parent and guardian who accompanied you. You have arrived at years capable of improving under the advantages you will be likely to have, if you do but properly attend to them. They are talents put into your hands, of which an account will be required of you hereafter; and, being possessed of one, two, or four, see to it that you double your numbers.

The most amiable and useful disposition in a young mind is diffidence of itself; and this should lead you to seek advice and instruction from him who is

**Ibid.*, pages 31–32.

your natural guardian, and will always counsel and direct you in the best manner, both for your present and future happiness. You are in possession of a naturally good understanding, and of spirits unbroken by adversity and untamed with care. Improve your understanding by acquiring useful knowledge and virtue, such as will render you an ornament to society, an honor to your country, and a blessing to your parents. Great learning and superior abilities, should you ever possess them, will be of little value and small estimation, unless virtue, honor, truth, and integrity are added to them. Adhere to those religious sentiments and principles which were early instilled into your mind, and remember, that you are accountable to your Maker for all your words and actions.

Let me enjoin it upon you to attend constantly and steadfastly to the precepts and instructions of your father, as you value the happiness of your mother and your own welfare. His care and attention to you render many things unnecessary for me to write, which I might otherwise do; but the inadvertency and heedlessness of youth require line upon line and precept upon precept, and, when enforced by the joint efforts of both parents, will, I hope, have a due influence upon your conduct; for, dear as you are to me, I would much rather you should have found your grave in the ocean you have crossed, or that any untimely death crop you in your infant years, than see you an immoral, profligate, or graceless child.

You have entered early in life upon the great theater of the world, which is full of temptations and vice of every kind. You are not wholly unacquainted with history, in which you have read of crimes which your inexperienced mind could scarcely believe credible. You have been taught to think of them with horror, and to view vice as

“A monster of so frightful mien,
That, to be hated, needs but to be seen.”

Yet you must keep a strict guard upon yourself, or the odious monster will soon lose its terror by becoming familiar to you. The modern history of our own times furnishes as black a list of crimes as can be paralleled in ancient times, even if we go back to Nero, Caligula, or Caesar Borgia. Young as you are, the cruel war, into which we have been compelled by the haughty tyrant of Britain and the bloody emissaries of his vengeance, may stamp upon your mind this certain truth, that the welfare and prosperity of all countries, communities, and, I may add, individuals, depend upon their morals. That nation to which we were once united, as it has departed from justice, eluded and subverted the wise laws which formerly governed it, and suffered the worst of crimes to go unpunished, has lost its valor, wisdom, and humanity, and, from being the dread and terror of Europe, has sunk into derision and infamy.

But, to quit political subjects, I have been greatly anxious for your safety, having never heard of the frigate since she sailed, till, about a week ago, a New York paper informed, that she was taken and carried into Plymouth. I did not fully credit this report, though it gave me much uneasiness. I yesterday heard that a French vessel was arrived at Portsmouth, which brought news of the safe arrival

of the *Boston*; but this wants confirmation. I hope it will not be long before I shall be assured of your safety. You must write me an account of your voyage, of your situation, and of everything entertaining, you can recollect.

Be assured I am most affectionately yours,——.*

Passy, September the 27th, 1778

HONORED MAMMA,

My papa enjoins it upon me to keep a journal, or a diary of the events that happen to me, and of objects that I see, and of characters that I converse with from day to day; and altho' I am convinced of the utility, importance, and necessity of this exercise, yet I have not the patience and perseverance enough to do it so constantly as I ought. My papa, who takes a great deal of pains to put me in the right way, has also advised me to keep copies of all my letters, and has given me a convenient blank book for this end; and altho' I shall have the mortification a few years hence to read a great deal of my childish nonsense, yet I shall have the pleasure and advantage of remarking the several steps by which I shall have advanced in taste, judgment, and knowledge. A journal book and a letter book of a lad of eleven years old can not be expected to contain much of science, literature, arts, wisdom or wit, yet it may serve to perpetuate many observations that I may make, and may hereafter help me to recollect both persons and things that would otherwise escape my memory.†

Many New England homes encouraged the presence and attention of their children when the serious issues and events of the times were discussed. No wonder then, that John Quincy Adams in Paris, could thoroughly enjoy the association and conversation of men like Dr. Franklin, and Arthur Lee. They were interested in everything, the art of diplomacy no less than the arts and sciences themselves. This was characteristic of Americans. It was to be true of John Quincy Adams also. During his years of service to the rising nation, he did much to encourage the arts and sciences stating, "The founders of your constitution have left it as their dying commandment to you, to achieve, as the lawful sovereigns of the land, this resplendent glory to yourselves—to patronize and encourage the arts and sciences, and all good literature."

Johnny also enjoyed the enthusiastic friendship of Madame Lafayette whose charm and naturalness was in contrast to the high style of other French ladies. Madame la Marquise de la Fayette had a bond of sympathy for that nation whose cause her husband had adopted. She was a refreshing change from the painted ladies of the court and was kind and interested in the young lad.

But best of all John Quincy Adams enjoyed the companionship and supervision of his father, John Adams. Father and son spent time together reviewing Johnny's studies. His father's commendations were an added incentive to master his Latin and Greek and the ancient classics. He also made considerable progress in English history and literature, and was thoroughly informed in European politics as well as in all matters connected with American questions. His

**Life, Administration and Times of John Quincy Adams, Sixth President of the United States*, by John Robert Ireland, 1887, pages 20–22.

†*Ibid.*, page 17.

father pronounced him a good penman—a legacy to those who would be able to read the writings and observations of our founders.

John Adams' assignment in Paris was shorter than anticipated and father and son were back in Boston in a year. John Quincy Adams expected now to enter Andover Academy in preparation for Harvard. Unexpectedly a new call upon his father's services took both him and Charles, a younger brother, back to Europe.

The education of the two young Adamses was continued in the French school in Passy where Johnny had previously been enrolled. When John Adams left Paris for a mission to Holland, his sons accompanied him and while there, attended the Amsterdam Latin School. In Leyden the boys attended lectures on medicine, studied Homer, Greek grammar and the New Testament in the world-famous university where the Pilgrims' pastor, John Robinson, had studied and lectured.

A DIPLOMATIC APPOINTMENT AT FOURTEEN

The maturity of John Quincy Adams and his proficiency in reading, writing and speaking French resulted in 1781, in his appointment by Congress as diplomatic secretary to his friend, Francis Dana, just appointed Commissioner to the Court of Catherine the Great. Dana's instructions to seek the friendship and sympathy of Russia included the fourteen-year old youth whose competency as an interpreter was extremely valuable in the mission. The boy resided in St. Petersburg for more than a year, a city to which he would return some twenty-eight years later as Ambassador from the United States.

It was during this year in Petersburg that John Quincy Adams began actually to keep a diary—a habit which he maintained some sixty-seven years. He had already become aware of the relationship of character and a philosophy of government to the individual freedom and productivity expressed in the countries through which he travelled. He wrote, "this is not a very good place for learning the Latin or Greek languages, as there is no academy or school here, and but very few private teachers, who demand at the rate of 90 pounds sterling a year for an hour and a half each day. Mr. Dana don't chuse to employ any at that extravagant price without your positive orders, but I hope I shall be able to go on alone."

To his father he wrote, October 12, 1781:

There is nobody here but Princes and Slaves, the Slaves cannot have their children instructed, and the nobility that chuse to have their's send them into foreign countries. There is not one school to be found in the whole city.*

There was an English library in St. Petersburg to which Mr. Dana subscribed, so Johnny continued his studies and reading, and began to teach himself German. In fourteen months the mission came to an end. Johnny decided not to wait until the winter was over, and at fifteen began a journey crossing a snow-bound Europe, alone—a journey which took him some six months. He took it upon himself to look into the prospects of future trade between Sweden and Denmark and his own country. With credentials from Dana he spent several months in Sweden. The Swedes "are in general good friends to America, but seem to be a little afraid for their mines; however they are very well disposed for carrying on commerce with America.... Mr.

**The Writings of John Quincy Adams*, edited by Worthington Chauncey Ford, Vol. I, 1779–1796, page 6.

Brandenburg, in Stockholm, intends to send a Vessel to some part of America this spring. He desired me to let him know what would be the best articles he could send, and gave me a list of the exports of Sweden, a copy of which I have sent to Mr. Dana, desiring him to answer Mr. Brandenburg as I was not certain myself about the matter.”[†]

Back in Paris as his father’s secretary he wrote his mother his observations on the government of Russia:

Paris, September 10th, 1783

HONOURED MAMMA:

As you have ordered me in a letter, which I have lately received, to give you my observations on the countries thro’ which I have travelled, the following are some upon Russia; but, I must previously beg you will remember, that you say in your letter that you expect neither the precision of a Robertson, nor the elegance of a Voltaire; therefore, you must take them as they are.

The government of Russia is entirely despotic; the sovereign is absolute in all the extent of the word. The persons, the estates, the fortunes of the nobility depend entirely upon his caprice. And the nobility have the same power over the people, that the sovereign has over them. The nation is wholly composed of nobles and serfs, or, in other words, of masters and slaves. The countryman is attached to the land in which he is born; if the land is sold, he is sold with it, and he is obliged to give to his landlord the portion of his time which he chooses to demand....

This form of government is disadvantageous to the sovereign, to the nobles and to the people, For first, it exposes the sovereign every moment to revolution, of which there have been *already* four in the course of this century ... *Secondly*, as the nobles all depend wholly upon the sovereign, they are always in danger of their estates being confiscated and themselves sent into Siberia ... And, *thirdly*, as to the people nobody, I believe, will assert that a people can be happy who are subjected to personal slavery. Some of these serfs are immensely rich, but they are not free, and, therefore, they are despised; besides they depend still upon the nobles, who make them contribute the more for their riches ... The richer they are, the more the nobles prize them. Thus a common man costs but 80 or 100 rubles, at most; but I have seen a man, who gave to his landlord, for his liberty, and that of his descendants, 450,000 rubles. This proves the esteem they have for liberty, even where one would think they should not know that such a thing exists.

As I am a little pressed for time, and as my letter has already run to a considerable length, I must, for the present subscribe myself,

Your most dutiful son[‡]

A CRITICAL DECISION TO GO HOME

In 1784 the Adams family was reunited in England. Two Abigail’s, mother and sister, were coming to Europe to join two John Adamses. The American Revolution was over, and John

[†]*Ibid.*, page 7.

[‡]*Ibid.*, pages 10–13.

Adams had once again played a conspicuous part with John Quincy Adams transcribing more than one of the historic peace documents for his father.

What a reunion it was. Mother Abigail hardly recognized her grown-up elegant son with waist-coat, small-clothes, hat and sword in the very latest style of Europe. And Sister Abigail, little Abby, now nineteen and vivacious, was eager to be escorted by her brother to the sights and sounds of London. It was a most satisfying time of re-acquaintance and approval. Then on to Paris.

As joint Commissioners in Paris, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson renewed their friendship. The young Adams' were charmed with Mr. Jefferson whose love of young people prompted him to plan many activities on their behalf. The studious John Quincy found a diversion from his books and he immensely enjoyed escorting both mother and sister to the salons of many eminent French friends.

But his mind began to turn on other things. Writing to a friend at the close of 1784 he said:

You can imagine what an addition has been made to my happiness by the arrival of a kind and tender mother, and of a sister who fulfills my most sanguine expectations; yet the desire of returning to America still possesses me. My country has over me an attractive power which I do not understand. Indeed, I believe that all men have an attachment to their country distinct from all other attachments ... But I have another reason for desiring to return to my native country. I have been such a wandering being these seven years, that I have never performed any regular course of studies, and am deficient on many subjects. I wish very much to have a degree at Harvard, and shall probably not be able to obtain it unless I spend at least one year there.*

It is a credit to the maturity of John Quincy Adams that he recognized the requirements for his preparation for a life of usefulness. Nevertheless, to his Diary, he confessed a reluctance to surrender his independent life to the discipline of a college quadrangle. He wrote:

After having been traveling for these seven years almost all over Europe, and having been in the world and among company for three; to return to spend one or two years within the pale of a college, subjected to all the rules which I have so long been freed from; then to plunge into the dry and tedious study of the law for three years; and afterwards not expect (however good an opinion I may have of myself) to bring myself into notice under three or four years more, if ever. It is really a prospect somewhat discouraging for a youth of my ambition (for I have ambition, though I hope its object is laudable). But still,

“O, how wretched is that poor man
that hangs on princes' favors!”

or on those of anybody else. I am determined that so long as I shall be able to get my own living in an honorable manner, I will depend upon no one. My father has been so much taken up all his life-time with the interests of the public, that his own fortune has suffered by it; so that his children will have to provide for

**Life, Administration and Times of John Quincy Adams*, by John Robert Ireland, 1887, pages 29–30.

themselves, which I shall never be able to do, if I loiter away my precious time in Europe, and shun going home until I am forced to it.[†]

So, despite the appointment of John Adams as Minister to London and the opportunities of living abroad with the family for a few more interesting years, John Quincy Adams responded to the same call that his father had always responded to—duty. Once again he set forth alone—this time homeward bound on an eight-week voyage to America. As he turned his steps towards Harvard, he carried a letter from his father to Cousin Samuel Adams:

The child whom you used to lead out into the Common, to see with detestation the British troops, and with pleasure the Boston militia, will have the honor to deliver you this letter. He has since seen the troops of most nations in Europe, without any ambition, I hope, of becoming a military man. He thinks of the bar and peace and civil life, and I hope will follow and enjoy them with less interruption than his father could. If you have in Boston a virtuous club, such as we used to delight and improve ourselves in, they will inspire him with such sentiments as a young American ought to entertain, and give him less occasion for lighter company.

I think it no small proof of his discretion, that he chooses to go to New England rather than to Old. You and I know, that it will probably be more for his honor and his happiness in the result; but young gentlemen of eighteen do not always see through the same medium with old ones of fifty...*

John Quincy Adams also carried another letter which he delivered to Professor Waterhouse at Harvard College. It, too, was from his father and it endeavored to introduce an applicant whose preparation was unique and had been largely the result of determined self-education:

Auteuil, 24 April, 1785

This letter will be delivered you by your old acquaintance John Quincy Adams, whom I beg leave to recommend to your attention and favor. He is anxious to study some time at your university before he begins the study of the law, which appears at present to be the profession of his choice. He must undergo an examination, in which I suspect he will not appear exactly what he is. In truth, there are few who take their degrees at college, who have so much knowledge. But his studies having been pursued by himself, on his travels, without any steady tutor, he will be found awkward in speaking Latin, in prosody, in parsing, and even, perhaps, in that accuracy of pronunciation in reading orations or poems in that language, which is often chiefly attended to in such examinations. It seems to be necessary, therefore, that I make this apology for him to you, and request you to communicate it in confidence to the gentlemen who are to examine him, and such others as you think prudent.

If you were to examine him in English and French poetry, I know not where you would find anybody his superior; in Roman and English history, few persons of his age. It is rare to find a youth possessed of so much knowledge. He has

[†]*Ibid.*, pages 30–31.

**The Works of John Adams*, 1854, Vol. IX, page 532.

translated Virgil's Aeneid, Suetonius, the whole of Sallust, and Tacitus's Agricola, his Germany, and several books of his Annals, a great part of Horace, some of Ovid, and some of Caesar's commentaries, in writing, besides a number of Tully's orations. These he may show you; and although you will find the translations in many places inaccurate in point of style, as must be expected at his age, you will see abundant proof that it is impossible to make those translations without understanding his authors and their language very well.

In Greek his progress has not been equal; yet he has studied morsels in Aristotle's Poetics, in Plutarch's Lives, and Lucian's Dialogues, the choice of Hercules, in Xenophon, and lately he has gone through several books in Homer's Iliad.

In mathematics I hope he will pass muster. In the course of the last year, instead of playing cards like the fashionable world, I have spent my evenings with him. We went with some accuracy through the geometry in the Preceptor, the eight books of Simpson's Euclid in Latin, and compared it, problem by problem and theorem by theorem, with le père de Chales in French; we went through plane trigonometry and plain sailing, Fenning's Algebra, and the decimal fractions, arithmetical and geometrical proportions, and the conic sections, in Ward's mathematics. I then attempted a sublime flight, and endeavored to give him some idea of the differential method of calculation of the Marquis de L'Hopital, and the method of fluxions and infinite series of Sir Isaac Newton; but alas! it is thirty years since I thought of mathematics, and I found I had lost the little I once knew, especially of these higher branches of geometry, so that he is as yet but a smatterer, like his father. However, he has a foundation laid, which will enable him with a year's attendance on the mathematical professor, to make the necessary proficiency for a degree.

He is studious enough, and emulous enough, and when he comes to mix with his new friends and young companions, he will make his way well enough. I hope he will be upon his guard against those airs of superiority among the scholars, which his larger acquaintance with the world, and his manifest superiority in the knowledge of some things, may but too naturally inspire into a young mind, and I beg of you, Sir, to be his friendly monitor in this respect and in all others.[†]

In six months John Quincy Adams had prepared himself for entrance into Harvard College as a Junior. He entered a class of one hundred and forty and graduated second in the class of 1786, delivering one of the valedictory orations on the subject of "The Importance of Public Faith to the Well-Being of a Community." Now there remained only the reading of law in the office of the learned Theophilus Parsons at New-buryport, later of the Massachusetts Supreme Court. Three years later he was admitted to practice in Essex County, July 15, 1790. Now began the period of waiting which he had dreaded.

[†]*Ibid.*, pages 530–531.

CHALLENGES PHILOSOPHY OF FRENCH REVOLUTION

But John Quincy Adams did not let this three year period pass without an application of his philosophy of government. Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* had just been published under the endorsement of Thomas Jefferson, serving Washington's administration as Secretary of State. John Quincy Adams in a series of essays signed PUBLICOLA challenged the fundamental doctrines of Paine's work. He denied that "whatever a whole nation chooses to do, it has the right to do" and he maintained that "nations, no less than individuals, are subject to the eternal and immutable laws of justice and morality." In effect, John Quincy Adams indicated "that Paine's doctrine annihilated the security of every man for his inalienable rights, and would lead in practice to a hideous despotism, concealed under the party-colored garments of democracy."

At this time Americans were to be tested severely in their friendship for their Revolutionary ally, France. Students of a philosophy of government could discern the direction of the nation, from the fall of the Bastille, the destruction of the French constitution, the execution of their king, and the succeeding anarchy and despotism which followed. John Quincy Adams challenged Paine's contention that the people of Great Britain should follow the example of France and "topple down headlong" their present government. But, at the same time he reiterated the distinctions between the American and the French Revolutions:

Happy, thrice happy the people of America! whose gentleness of manners and habits of virtue are still sufficient to reconcile the enjoyment of their natural rights, with the peace and tranquillity of their country; whose principles of religious liberty did not result from an indiscriminate contempt of all religion whatever, and whose equal representation in their legislative councils was founded upon an equality really existing among them, and not upon the metaphysical speculations of fanciful politicians, vainly contending against the unalterable course of events, and the established order of nature.*

When in 1793 Great Britain declared war against France, the feelings in America seemed to be far from neutral. Traditional hostility towards Great Britain tended to make Americans take belligerent action against the commerce of Great Britain through privateering. Once again John Quincy Adams under pseudonym of MARCELLUS exposed the lawlessness, injustice and criminality of such interference in favor of one of the belligerents. He maintained that "impartial and unequivocal neutrality was the imperious duty of the United States." This position strengthened the hand of the administration of George Washington as it issued the Proclamation of Neutrality.

One more aspect of neutrality had to be challenged. This was the presence and conduct of the French minister, Genet, who, under the cloak of diplomatic immunity had challenged and insulted our national government for its advocacy of neutrality. Genet, through a chain of "democratic societies", appealed to the people outside their own government. John Quincy Adams exposed Genet's actions as a violation of the Law of Nations:

When therefore the French Minister 'thanks God, that he has forgotten what GROTIUS, PUFFENDORF and VATTTEL have written upon the laws of nations,' he ought to be told, that his forgetfulness 'is not a thing to thank God on.'... To

**The Writings of John Quincy Adams*, edited by Worthington Chauncey Ford, 1913, page 98.

insult the memory and slander the reputation of men like these, of men whose virtues and genius have deserved well of mankind, does as little credit to the head as to the heart of Mr. Genet.[†]

President Washington was indeed under obligation to John Quincy Adams, for his writings turned the tide of sentiment against Genet. His attention became fixed upon the young man and he began to make inquiries concerning his life and character. He saw in him a man of political knowledge who could effectively express a philosophy of government. His background of familiarity with the languages and customs of foreign courts seemed to mark him as a unique representative for his country.

Accordingly, in June of 1794 John Quincy Adams, aged 28, was summoned to Philadelphia where he received his commission as minister from the United States to the Netherlands. John Adams, then Vice President, had made no effort to secure this position for his son although President Washington had consulted him as to the availability of the young man. Writing a few weeks before the appointment had been made official, John Adams informed Abigail Adams of the recognition of her son:

It is proper that I should apprise you, that the President has it in contemplation to send your son to Holland, that you may recollect yourself and prepare for the event. I make this communication to you in confidence, at the desire of the President, communicated to me yesterday by the Secretary of State. You must keep it an entire secret until it shall be announced to the public in the journal of the Senate. But our son must hold himself in readiness to come to Philadelphia, to converse with the President, Secretary of State, Secretary of the Treasury, &c., and receive his commissions and instructions, without loss of time. He will go to Providence in the stage, and thence to New York by water, and thence to Philadelphia in the stage. He will not set out, however, until he is informed of his appointment.*

A CHARACTER TO SUPPORT A CHRISTIAN REPUBLIC

A careful study of the public life and writings of John Quincy Adams is required to properly assess his application of character and philosophy of government. Here we can only briefly indicate the offices he held and some of his major accomplishments.

PUBLIC SERVICE OF JOHN QUINCY ADAMS

Age	Office	Dates
14	Diplomatic Secretary to Francis Dana, minister to Russia. Appointed by the Continental Congress	1781–1782

[†]*Ibid.*, pages 165–166.

**Life and Public Services of John Quincy Adams*, by William H. Seward, 1849, page 62.

27	Resident Minister to Holland. Appointed by George Washington	1794–1797
30	United States Ambassador to Prussia. Appointed by John Adams under special urging from George Washington	1797–1801
35	Elected a member of the Massachusetts State Senate	1802
36	Elected to the United States Senate from Massachusetts	1803–1808
42	Minister to Russia. Appointed by President Madison	1809–1815
48	Minister to England. Appointed by James Madison	1815–1817
50	Secretary of State. Appointed by James Monroe	1817–1825
58	President of the United States of America	1825–1829
63	Elected to the United States Congress, House of Representatives, to fill the Plymouth seat from Massachusetts	1830–1848

OUTSTANDING ACCOMPLISHMENTS

1817: Standardization of Weights and Measures of the United States

February 22, 1819: Treaty with Spain for acquisition of Florida

1823: The Monroe Doctrine—written by John Quincy Adams

February 22, 1841: The *Amistad* case argued before the United States Supreme Court

December 3, 1844: Opening of the Twenty-Eighth Congress and the rescinding of the gag rule. The right of petition restored to the American people.

Perhaps the most notable accomplishment of John Quincy Adams during his years in Congress was his steadfast effort to maintain the right of petition. This effort became the focus of the pro and anti-slavery forces which brought upon his head the invective of both sides. John Quincy Adams was no abolitionist but steered a lonely course of principle. As a Christian his position on slavery brought his weight against the admission of slave states into the union.

Doubtless God raised the voice of John Quincy Adams so that the conscience of American government could come to terms with this basic Biblical principle of the Declaration of Independence. Here are his sentiments on the subject:

When our fathers abjured the name of Britons, and ‘assumed among the nations of the earth the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature’s God entitled them,’ they tacitly contracted the engagement for themselves, and above all for their posterity, to contribute, in their corporate and national capacity, their full share, ay, and more than their full share, of the virtues that elevate and of the graces that adorn the character of civilized man. They announced themselves as *reformers* of the institution of civil society. They spoke of the laws of nature, and in the name of nature’s God; and by that sacred adjuration they pledged us, their children, to labor with united and concerted energy, from the cradle to the grave, to purge the earth of all slavery; to restore the race of man to the full enjoyment of those rights which the God of nature had bestowed upon him at his birth; to disenthral his limbs from chains, to break the fetters from his feet and the manacles from his hands, and set him free for the use of all his physical powers for the improvement of his own condition. The God in whose name they spoke had taught them, in the revelation of the Gospel, that the only way in which man can discharge his duty to Him is by loving his neighbor as himself, and doing with him as he would be done by; respecting his rights while enjoying his own, and applying all his emancipated powers of body and of mind to self-improvement and the improvement of his race.*

CONCERN FOR THE CHARACTER OF THE NEXT GENERATION

Concern for posterity distinguished the founding fathers of America. Every generation has the Biblical responsibility to remember what has been given to us through the inheritance received from our fathers. Likewise, we cannot live without regard for those who follow us. “One generation shall praise thy works to another, and shall declare thy mighty acts” (Psalm 145:4).

We conclude this brief introduction to the education of John Quincy Adams with evidence of his concern for the character of the next generation. Raised in a Christian home he too wished to inculcate in his own children the teaching and learning of Biblical principles of life. Though absent from some members of his family, sometimes for years, as he served his country in foreign posts, his children were ever in his heart and in his prayers. Here is one of a series of letters to his son on “The Bible and Its Teachings.” It is preceded by a brief biographical sketch and statement by James L. Alden who published the nine letters because of his own concern for the rising generation in America:

The following letters were written by Mr. Adams, while ambassador at St. Petersburg, to one of his sons, who was at school in Massachusetts. Their purpose is the inculcation of a love and reverence for the Holy Scriptures, and a delight in their perusal and study. Throughout his long life, Mr. Adams was

**Memoir of the Life of John Quincy Adams*, by Josiah Quincy, 1858, Pages 407–8.

himself a daily and devout reader of the Scriptures, and delighted in comparing and considering them in the various languages with which he was familiar, hoping thereby to acquire a nicer and clearer appreciation of their meaning. The Bible was emphatically his counsel and monitor through life, and the fruits of its guidance are seen in the unsullied character which he bore through the turbid waters of political contention to his final earthly rest. Though long and fiercely opposed and condemned in life, he left no man behind him who would wish to fix a stain on the name he has inscribed so high on the roll of his country's most gifted and illustrious sons.

The intrinsic value of these letters, their familiar and lucid style, their profound and comprehensive views, their candid and reverent spirit, must win for them a large measure of the public attention and esteem. But, apart from even this, the testimony so unconsciously borne by their pure-minded and profoundly learned author to the truth and excellence of the Christian faith and records, will not be lightly regarded.

It is no slight testimonial to the verity and worth of Christianity, that in all ages since its promulgation, the great mass of those who have risen to eminence by their profound wisdom, integrity, and philanthropy, have recognized and revered Jesus of Nazareth as the Son of the living God. To the names of Augustine, Xavier, Fenelon, Milton, Locke, Lavater, Howard, Chateaubriand, and their thousands of compeers in Christian faith, among the world's wisest and noblest, it is not without pride that the American may add, from among his countrymen, those of such men as WASHINGTON, JAY, PATRICK HENRY, and JOHN QUINCY ADAMS.

St. Petersburg, Sept., 1811

My dear Son:

In your letter of the 18th January to your mother, you mentioned that you read to your aunt a chapter in the Bible or a section of Doddridge's Annotations every evening. This information gave me real pleasure; for so great is my veneration for the Bible, and so strong my belief, that when duly read and meditated on, it is of all books in the world, that which contributes most to make men good, wise, and happy—that the earlier my children begin to read it, the more steadily they pursue the practice of reading it throughout their lives, the more lively and confident will be my hopes that they will prove useful citizens to their country, respectable members of society, and a real blessing to their parents. But I hope you have now arrived at an age to understand that reading, even in the Bible, is a thing in itself, neither good nor bad, but that all the good which can be drawn from it, is by the use and improvement of what you have read, with the help of your own reflection. Young people sometimes boast of how many books, and how much they have read; when, instead of boasting, they ought to be ashamed of having wasted so much time, to so little profit.

I advise you, my son, in whatever you read, and most of all in reading the Bible, to remember that it is for the purpose of making you wiser and more virtuous. I have myself, for many years, made it a practice to read through the Bible once every year. I have always endeavored to read it with the same spirit

and temper of mind, which I now recommend to you: that is, with the intention and desire that it may contribute to my advancement in wisdom and virtue. My desire is indeed very imperfectly successful; for, like you, and like the Apostle Paul, “I find a law in my members, warring against the laws of my mind.” But as I know that it is my nature to be imperfect, so I know that it is my duty to aim at perfection; and feeling and deploring my own frailties, I can only pray Almighty God, for the aid of his Spirit to strengthen my good desires, and to subdue my propensities to evil; for it is from him, that every good and every perfect gift descends.

My custom is, to read four or five chapters every morning, immediately after rising from my bed. It employs about an hour of my time, and seems to me the most suitable manner of beginning the day. But, as other cares, duties and occupations, engage the remainder of it, I have perhaps never a sufficient portion of my time in meditation, upon what I have read. Even meditation itself is often fruitless, unless it has some special object in view; useful thoughts often arise in the mind, and pass away without being remembered or applied to any good purpose—like the seed scattered upon the surface of the ground, which the birds devour, or the wind blows away, or which rot without taking root, however good the soil may be upon which they are cast....

I have thought if in addition to the hour which I daily give to the reading of the Bible, I should also from time to time (and especially on the Sabbath) apply another hour occasionally to communicate to you the reflections that arise in my mind upon its perusal, it might not only tend to fix and promote my own attention to the excellent instructions of that sacred Book, but perhaps also assist your advancement in its knowledge and wisdom. At your age, it is probable that you have still greater difficulties to understand all that you read in the Bible, than I have at mine; and if you have so much self-observation as your letters indicate, you will be sensible of as much want of attention, both voluntary and involuntary, as I here acknowledge in myself. I intend, therefore, for the purpose of contributing to your improvement and my own, to write you several letters, in due time to follow this, in which I shall endeavor to show you how you may derive the most advantage to yourself, from the perusal of the Scriptures. It is probable, when you receive these letters, you will not, at first reading entirely understand them; if that should be the case, ask your grand-parents, or your uncle or aunt, to explain them: if you still find them too hard, put them on file, and lay them by for two or three years, after which read them again, and you will find them easy enough.

It is essential, my son, in order that you may go through life with comfort to yourself, and usefulness to your fellow-creatures, that you should form and adopt certain rules or principles, for the government of your own conduct and temper. Unless you have such rules and principles, there will be numberless occasions on which you will have no guide for your government but your passions. In your infancy and youth, you have been, and will be for some years, under the authority and control of your friends and instructors; but you must soon come to the age when you must govern yourself. You have already come to that age in many respects; you know the difference between right and wrong, and you know some

of your duties, and the obligations you are under, to become acquainted with them all.

It is in the Bible, you must learn them, and from the Bible how to practice them. Those duties are to God, to your fellow-creatures, and to yourself. “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength, and thy neighbor as thyself.” On these two commandments, Jesus Christ expressly says, “hang all the law and the prophets;” that is to say, the whole purpose of Divine Revelation is to inculcate them efficaciously upon the minds of men. You will perceive that I have spoken of duties to *yourself*, distinct from those to God and to your fellow-creatures; while Jesus Christ speaks only of two commandments. The reason is, because Christ, and the commandments repeated by him, consider self-love as so implanted in the heart of every man by the law of his nature, that it requires no commandment to establish its influence over the heart; and so great do they know its power to be, that they demand no other measure for the love of our neighbor, than that which they know we shall have for ourselves. But from the love of God, and the love of our neighbor, result duties to ourselves as well as to them, and they are all to be learned in equal perfection by our searching the Scriptures.

Let us, then, search the Scriptures; and, in order to pursue our inquiries with methodical order, let us consider the various sources of information, that we may draw from in this study. The Bible contains the revelation of the will of God. It contains the history of the creation of the world, and of mankind; and afterward the history of one peculiar nation, certainly the most extraordinary nation that has ever appeared upon the earth. It contains a system of religion, and of morality, which we may examine upon its own merits, independent of the sanction it receives from being the Word of God; and it contains a numerous collection of books, written at different ages of the world, by different authors, which we may survey as curious monuments of antiquity, and as literary compositions. In what light soever we regard it, whether with reference to revelation, to literature, to history, or to morality—it is an invaluable and inexhaustible mine of knowledge and virtue.

I shall number separately those letters that I mean to write you upon the subject of the Bible, and as, after they are finished, I shall perhaps ask you to read them all together, or to look over them again myself, you must keep them on separate file. I wish that hereafter they may be useful to your brothers and sisters, as well as to you.

As you will receive them as a token of affection for you, during my absence, I pray that they may be worthy to read by them all with benefit to themselves, if it please God, that they should live to be able to understand them.

From your affectionate Father,

JOHN QUINCY ADAMS*

**Letters of John Quincy Adams to His Son on the Bible and Its Teachings*, 1850, pages 6–21.