

## John Adams and the Coming of the Revolution \*

The first news of the Stamp Act reached the American colonies during the last week of May 1765 and produced an immediate uproar, and in Massachusetts especially. Starting in November, nearly everything written or printed on paper other than private correspondence and books—all pamphlets, newspapers, advertisements, deeds, diplomas, bills, bonds, all legal documents, ships papers, even playing cards—were required to carry revenue stamps, some costing as much as ten pounds. The new law, the first British attempt to tax Americans directly, had been passed by Parliament to help pay for the cost of the French and Indian War and to meet the expense of maintaining a colonial military force to prevent Indian wars. Everyone was affected. The *Boston Gazette* reported Virginia in a state of “utmost consternation.” In August, Boston mobs, “like devils let loose,” stoned the residence of Andrew Oliver, secretary of the province, who had been appointed distributor of the stamps, then attacked and destroyed the house of Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson, wrongly suspecting him of having sponsored the detested tax.

[John] Adams, who had earlier joined a new law club in Boston started by Jeremiah Gridley, had, at Gridley’s suggestion, been working on an essay that would become *A Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law*. It was his first extended political work and one of the most salient of his life, written at the age of thirty. Now, at the height of the furor, he arranged for its publication as an unsigned, untitled essay in the *Gazette*. (It would be published in England later, in a volume titled *The True Sentiments of America*.) It was not a call to arms or mob action—with his countryman’s dislike of the Boston “rabble,” Adams was repelled by such an “atrocious violation of the peace.” The Stamp Act was hardly mentioned. Rather, it was a statement of his own fervent patriotism and the taproot conviction that American freedoms were not ideals still to be obtained, but rights long and firmly established by British law and by the courage and sacrifices of generations of Americans. Years later Adams would say the Revolution began in the minds of Americans long before any shots were fired or blood shed.

“Be it remembered,” he wrote in his *Dissertation*, “that liberty must at all hazards be supported. We have a right to it, derived from our Maker. But if we have not, our fathers have earned and bought it for us at the expense of their ease, their estates, their pleasure, and their blood . . .”

The essay began appearing in the *Gazette* on August 12, 1765, and it struck an immediate chord. “The author is a young man, not above 33 or 34, but of incomparable sense,” wrote Boston’s senior pastor, Charles Chauncey, to the learned Rhode Island clergyman and future president of Yale College, Ezra

Stiles. “I esteem that piece one of the best that has been written. It has done honor to its author; and it is a pity but he should be known.”

Soon afterward Adams drafted what became known as the Braintree Instructions—instructions from the freeholders of the town to their delegate to the General Court, the legislative body of Massachusetts—which, when printed in October in the *Gazette*, “rang” through the colony. “We have always understood it to be a grand and fundamental principle of the [English] constitution that no freeman should be subject to any tax to which he has not given his own consent.” There must be “no taxation without representation”—a phrase that had been used in Ireland for more than a generation. And in rejecting the rule of the juryless Admiralty Court in enforcing this law, the instructions declared that there must be a trial by jury and an independent judiciary. In amazingly little time the document was adopted by forty towns, something that had never happened before.

Now fully joined in Boston’s political ferment, Adams was meeting with Gridley, James Otis, Samuel Adams, and others. Observing them closely, he concluded that it was his older, second cousin, Samuel Adams, who had “the most thorough understanding of liberty.” Samuel Adams was “zealous and keen in the cause,” of “steadfast integrity,” a “universal good character” The esteemed Otis, however, had begun to act strangely. He was “liable to great inequities of temper, sometimes in despondency, sometimes in rage,” Adams recorded in dismay.

Otis, a protege of Gridley, had been for Adams the shining example of the lawyer-scholar, learned yet powerful in argument. Now he became Adams’s political hero, just as Thomas Hutchinson became Adams’s chief villain. A lifetime later, Adams would vividly describe Otis as he had been in his surpassing moment, in the winter of 1761, in argument against writs of assistance, search warrants that permitted customs officers to enter and search any premises whenever they wished. Before the bench in the second-floor Council Chamber of the Province House in Boston, Otis had declared such writs—which were perfectly valid in English law and commonly issued in England—null and void because they violated the natural rights of Englishmen. Adams, who had been present as an observer only, would remember it as one of the inspiring moments of his life, a turning point for him as for history. The five judges, with Hutchinson at their head as chief justice, sat in comfort near blazing fireplaces, Adams recalled, “all in their new fresh robes of scarlet English cloth, in their broad hats, and immense judicial wigs.” But Otis, in opposition, was a “flame” unto himself. “With the promptitude of classical illusions, a depth of research . . . and a torrent of impetuous eloquence, he hurried away all before him.” By Adams’s account, every one of the immense crowded audience went away, as he did, ready to take up arms against writs of assistance. “Then and there was the first scene of the first act of opposition to

---

\* McCullough, David. *John Adams*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001.

the arbitrary claims of Great Britain,” Adams would claim. “Then and there the child independence was born.”

But by 1765 it was the tragic decline of James Otis that gripped Adams. At meetings now, Otis talked on endlessly and to no point. No one could get a word in. “Otis is in confusion yet,” Adams noted a year or so later. “He rambles and wanders like a ship without a helm.” Adams began to doubt Otis’s sanity, and as time passed, it became clear that Otis, his hero, was indeed going mad, a dreadful spectacle.

“The year 1765 has been the most remarkable year of my life,” Adams wrote in his diary that December. “The enormous engine fabricated by the British Parliament for battering down all the rights and liberties of America, I mean the Stamp Act, has raised and spread through the whole continent a spirit that will be recorded to our honor, with all future generations.”

“At home with my family. Thinking,” reads the entry of a few nights later.

“At home. Thinking,” he wrote Christmas Day.

With the repeal of the Stamp Act by Parliament in the spring of 1766, and the easing of tensions that followed in the next two years, until the arrival of British troops at Boston, Adams put politics aside to concentrate on earning a living. He was thinking of politics not at all, he insisted. He was back on the road, riding the circuit, the reach of his travels extending more than two hundred miles, from the island of Martha’s Vineyard off Cape Cod, north to Maine, which was then part of the Massachusetts Bay Province, to as far west as Worcester. As recalled in the family years later, he was endowed for the profession of law with the natural gifts of “a clear and sonorous voice,” a “ready elocution,” stubbornness, but with the “counter-check” of self-control, and a strong moral sense. He handled every kind of case—land transfers, trespass, admiralty, marine insurance, murder, adultery, rape, bastardy, buggery, assault and battery, tarring and feathering. He defended, not always successfully, poor debtors, horse thieves, and smugglers. He saw every side of life, learned to see things as they were, and was considered, as Jonathan Sewall would write, as “honest [a] lawyer as ever broke bread.”

In 1766, like his father before him, Adams was elected selectman in Braintree. But so active had his Boston practice become by 1768 that he moved the family to a rented house in the city, a decision he did not like, fearing the effect on their health. He established a Boston office and presently admitted two young men, Jonathan Austin and William Tudor, to read law with him, in return for fees of 10 pounds sterling. “What shall I do with two clerks at a time?” Adams speculated in his diary, adding that he would do all he could “for their education and advancement in the world,” a pledge he was to keep faithfully. When Billy Tudor was admitted to the bar three years later, Adams

took time to write to Tudor’s wealthy father to praise the young man for his clear head and honest heart, but also to prod the father into giving his son some help getting started in his practice. Adams had seen too often the ill effect of fathers who ignored their sons when a little help could have made all the difference.

With the death of Jeremiah Gridley the year before and the mental collapse of James Otis, John Adams, still in his thirties, had become Boston’s busiest attorney. He was “under full sail,” prospering at last, and in the Adams tradition, he began buying more land, seldom more than five or ten acres of salt marsh or woodland at a time, but steadily, year after year. (Among his father’s memorable observations was that he never knew a piece of land to run away or break.) Eventually, after his brother Peter married and moved to his wife’s house, John would purchase all of the old homestead, with its barn and fifty-three acres, which included Fresh Brook, to Adams a prime asset. In one pasture, he reckoned, there were a thousand red cedars, which in twenty years, “if properly pruned,” might be worth a shilling each. And with an appreciative Yankee eye, he noted “a quantity of good stone in it, too.”

He was becoming more substantial in other ways. “My good man is so very fat that I am lean as a rail,” [his wife] Abigail bemoaned to her sister Mary. He acquired more and more books, books being an acknowledged extravagance he could seldom curb. (With one London bookseller he had placed a standing order for “every book and pamphlet, of reputation, upon the subjects of law and government as soon as it comes out.”) “I want to see my wife and children every day,” he would write while away on the court circuit. “I want to see my grass and blossoms and corn... . But above all, except the wife and children, I want to see my books.” In the privacy of his journal, he could also admit now, if obliquely, to seeing himself as a figure of some larger importance. After noting in one entry that his horse had overfed on grass and water, Adams speculated wryly, “My biographer will scarcely introduce my little mare and her adventures.”

He could still search his soul over which path to follow. “To what object are my views directed?” he asked. “Am I grasping at money, or scheming for power?” Yes, he was amassing a library, but to what purpose? “Fame, fortune, power say some, are the ends intended by a library. The service of God, country, clients, fellow men, say others. Which of these lie nearest my heart?”...

With Boston full of red-coated British troops— sent in 1768 to keep order, as another round of taxes was imposed by Parliament, this time on paper, tea, paint, and glass—the atmosphere in the city turned incendiary. Incidents of violence broke out between townsmen and soldiers, the hated “Lobsterbacks.”

The crisis came in March of 1770, a year already shadowed for John and Abigail by the loss of a child. A baby girl, Susanna, born since the move to Boston and named for John’s mother, had died in February at a little more than

a year old. Adams was so upset by the loss that he could not speak of it for years.

On the cold moonlit evening of March 5, 1770, the streets of Boston were covered by nearly a foot of snow. On the icy, cobbled square where the Province House stood, a lone British sentry, posted in front of the nearby Customs House, was being taunted by a small band of men and boys. The time was shortly after nine. Somewhere a church bell began to toll, the alarm for fire, and almost at once crowds came pouring into the streets, many men, up from the waterfront, brandishing sticks and clubs. As a throng of several hundred converged at the Custom House, the lone guard was reinforced by eight British soldiers with loaded muskets and fixed bayonets, their captain with drawn sword. Shouting, cursing, the crowd pelted the despised redcoats with snowballs, chunks of ice, oyster shells, and stones. In the melee the soldiers suddenly opened fire, killing five men. Samuel Adams was quick to call the killings a “bloody butchery” and to distribute a print published by Paul Revere vividly portraying the scene as a slaughter of the innocent, an image of British tyranny, the Boston Massacre, that would become fixed in the public mind.

The following day thirty-four-year-old John Adams was asked to defend the soldiers and their captain, when they came to trial. No one else would take the case, he was informed. . . . Adams accepted, firm in the belief, as he said, that no man in a free country should be denied the right to counsel and a fair trial, and convinced, on principle, that the case was of utmost importance. As a lawyer, his duty was clear. That he would be hazarding his hard-earned reputation and, in his words, “incurring a clamor and popular suspicions and prejudices” against him, was obvious, and if some of what he later said on the subject would sound a little self-righteous, he was also being entirely honest.

Only the year before, in 1769, Adams had defended four American sailors charged with killing a British naval officer who had boarded their ship with a press gang to grab them for the British navy. The sailors were acquitted on grounds of acting in self-defense, but public opinion had been vehement against the heinous practice of impressment. Adams had been in step with the popular outrage, exactly as he was out of step now. He worried for Abigail, who was pregnant again, and feared he was risking his family’s safety as well as his own, such was the state of emotions in Boston. It was rumored he had been bribed to take the case. In reality, a retainer of eighteen guineas was the only payment he would receive.

Criticism of almost any kind was nearly always painful for Adams, but public scorn was painful in the extreme.

“The only way to compose myself and collect my thoughts,” he wrote in his diary, “is to set down at my table, place my diary before me, and take my pen into my hand. This apparatus takes off my attention from other objects. Pen, ink, and paper and a sitting posture are great helps to attention and thinking.”

From a treatise by the eminent Italian penologist and opponent of capital punishment Cesare, Marchese di Beccaria, he carefully copied the following:

If, by supporting the rights of mankind, and of invincible truth, I shall contribute to save from the agonies of death one unfortunate victim of tyranny, or of ignorance, equally fatal, his blessings and years of transport will be sufficient consolation to me for the contempt of all mankind.

There were to be two conspicuously fair trials held in the new courthouse on Queen Street. The first was of the British captain, Thomas Preston, the opening of the trial being delayed until October when passions had cooled. The second was of the soldiers. In the first trial Adams was assisted by young Josiah Quincy, Jr., while the court-appointed lawyer trying the case was Josiah’s brother, Samuel, assisted by Robert Treat Paine. Whether Captain Preston had given an order to fire, as was charged, could never be proven. Adams’s argument for the defense, though unrecorded, was considered a virtuoso performance. Captain Preston was found not guilty.

Adams’s closing for the second and longer trial, which was recorded, did not come until December 3, and lasted two days. The effect on the crowded courtroom was described as “electrical.” “I am for the prisoners at bar,” he began, then invoked the line from the Marchese di Beccaria. Close study of the facts had convinced Adams of the innocence of the soldiers. The tragedy was not brought on by the soldiers, but by the mob, and the mob, it must be understood, was the inevitable result of the flawed policy of quartering troops in a city on the pretext of keeping the peace:

We have entertained a great variety of phrases to avoid calling this sort of people a mob. Some call them shavers, some call them geniuses. The plain English is, gentlemen, [it was] most probably a motley rabble of saucy boys, Negroes and mulattoes, Irish teagues and outlandish jacktars. And why should we scruple to call such a people a mob, I can’t conceive, unless the name is too respectable for them. The sun is not about to stand still or go out, nor the rivers to dry up because there was a mob in Boston on the 5th of March that attacked a party of soldiers. . . . Soldiers quartered in a populous town will always occasion two mobs where they prevent one. They are wretched conservators of the peace.

He described how the shrieking “rabble” pelted the soldiers with snowballs, oyster shells, sticks, “every species of rubbish,” as a cry went up to “Kill them! Kill them!” One soldier had been knocked down with a club, then hit again as soon as he could rise. “Do you expect he should behave like a stoic philosopher, lost in apathy?” Adams asked. Self-defense was the primary canon

of the law of nature. Better that many guilty persons escape unpunished than one innocent person should be punished. “The reason is, because it’s of more importance to community, that innocence should be protected, than it is, that guilt should be punished.” “Facts are stubborn things,” he told the jury, “and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictums of our passions, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence.”

The jury remained out two and a half hours. Of the eight soldiers, six were acquitted and two found guilty of manslaughter, for which they were branded on their thumbs.

There were angry reactions to the decision. Adams was taken to task in the *Gazette* and claimed later to have suffered the loss of more than half his practice. But there were no riots, and Samuel Adams appears never to have objected to the part he played. Possibly Samuel Adams had privately approved, even encouraged it behind the scenes, out of respect for John’s fierce integrity, and on the theory that so staunch a show of fairness would be good politics.

As time would show, John Adams’s part in the drama did increase his public standing, making him in the long run more respected than ever. Years later, reflecting from the perspective of old age, he himself would call it the most exhausting case he ever undertook, but conclude with pardonable pride that his part in the defense was “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.”

A second son, Charles, was born that summer of 1770, and for all the criticism to which he was being subjected, Adams was elected by the Boston Town Meeting as a representative to the Massachusetts legislature. It was his first real commitment to politics. Inevitably it would mean more time away from his practice, and still further reduction in income. When, the night of the meeting, he told Abigail of his apprehensions, she burst into tears, but then, as Adams would relate, said “she thought I had done as I ought, she was very willing to share in all that was to come.”

But the complications and demands of both the law and politics became too much and Adams suffered what appears to have been a physical breakdown. “Especially the constant obligation to speak in public almost every day for many hours had exhausted my health, brought on pain in my breast and complaint in my lungs, which seriously threatened my life,” he would later write. In the spring of 1771, he and the family moved back to Braintree, to “the air of my native spot, and the fine breezes from the sea,” which “together with daily rides on horseback,” gradually restored him.

Another child, Thomas Boylston, was born in September of 1772, and again Adams was off on the “vagabond life” of the circuit, carrying a copy of

*Don Quixote* in his saddlebag and writing Abigail sometimes as many as three letters a day.

Business was good in Massachusetts in the calm of 1772 and Adams prospered once again. He appeared in more than two hundred Superior Court cases. Among his clients were many of the richest men in the colony, including John Hancock. At the conclusion of one morning in court, Adams was told people were calling him the finest speaker they had ever heard, “the equal to the greatest orator that ever spoke in Greece or Rome.”

He could speak extemporaneously and, if need be, almost without limit. Once, to give a client time to retrieve a necessary record, Adams spoke for five hours, through which the court and jury sat with perfect patience. At the end he was roundly applauded because, as he related the story, he had spoken “in favor of justice.”

At the same time, he was vowing, at least in the privacy of his diary, to devote himself wholly to his private business and providing for his family. “Above all things I must avoid politics. ...” But as tensions in the colony mounted, so did his pent-up rage and longing for action. On an evening with the Cranches, when a visiting Englishman began extolling the English sense of justice, Adams exploded, taking everyone by surprise, and Adams as much as any. “I cannot but reflect upon myself with the severity of these rash, inexperienced, boyish, raw and awkward expressions,” he wrote afterward. “A man who has not better government of his tongue, no more command of his temper, is unfit for everything but children’s play and the company of boys.” There was no more justice in Britain than in hell, he had told the Englishman. By the time of the destruction of the tea, what was later to become known as the Boston Tea Party in December 1773, he had again moved the family to Boston. His hatred of mob action notwithstanding, Adams was exuberant over the event. In less than six months, in May 1774, in reprisal, the British closed the port of Boston, the worst blow to the city in its history. “We live, my dear soul, in an age of trial,” he told Abigail. Shut off from the sea, Boston was doomed. It must suffer martyrdom and expire in a noble cause. For himself, he saw “no prospect of any business in my way this whole summer. I don’t receive a shilling a week.”

Yet she must not assume he was “in the dumps.” Quite the contrary: he felt better than he had in years.

In 1774, Adams was chosen by the legislature as one of five delegates to the First Continental Congress at Philadelphia, and with all Massachusetts on the verge of rebellion, he removed Abigail and the children again to Braintree, where they would remain.

In July he traveled to Maine, for what was to be his last turn on the circuit before leaving for Philadelphia. During a break from the court at Falmouth (later Portland), he and Jonathan Sewall, who was still attorney general, climbed a hill overlooking the blue sweep of Casco Bay, where they could talk privately.

Their friendship had cooled in recent years, as had been inevitable under the circumstances. In his diary Adams had grieved that his best friend in the world had become his implacable enemy. “God forgive him for the part he has acted,” Adams had written, adding, “It is not impossible that he may make the same prayer for me.” Now Sewall pleaded with Adams not to attend the Congress. The power of Great Britain was “irresistible” and would destroy all who stood in the way, Sewall warned.

As long as they lived, neither man would forget the moment. Adams told Sewall he knew Great Britain was “determined on her system,” but “that very determination, determined me on mine.” The die was cast, Adams said. “Swim or sink, live or die, survive or perish, [I am] with my country . . . You may depend upon it.”

Less than a year later, after the battle of Bunker Hill, Sewall would choose to “quit America.” With his wife and family he sailed for London, never to return. “It is not despair which drives me away,” he wrote before departure. “I have faith . . . that rebellion will shrink back to its native hell, and that Great Britain will rise superior to all the gasconade of the little, wicked American politicians.”

Not long afterward, in a series of letters to the *Boston Gazette* that he signed “Novangelus”—the New Englander—Adams argued that Americans had every right to determine their own destiny and charged the Foreign Ministry in London with corruption and venal intent. America, Adams warned, could face subjugation of the kind inflicted on Ireland. Unless America took action, and at once, Adams wrote, they faced the prospect of living like the Irish on potatoes and water.

With Joseph Bass at his side, Adams crossed Long Bridge over the frozen Charles River and rode into Cambridge in the early afternoon of January 24, 1776, in time to dine with General Washington at the temporary quarters of Colonel Thomas Mifflin near Harvard Yard. Mifflin, a wealthy young Philadelphia merchant who served with Adams in the Continental Congress, had been one of the first to welcome Adams on his arrival in Philadelphia. As a “fighting Quaker,” he had since become Washington’s aide-de-camp.

Martha Washington was present with her husband, as were General Horatio Gates and his lady. When Martha Washington and Elizabeth Gates arrived in Cambridge by coach in December, it was remarked that they would surely be a welcome addition “in country where [fire] wood was scarce.” Gates,

a former British officer, was an affable, plain-faced man who, like Washington, had served during the French and Indian War on the disastrous Braddock expedition. As adjutant general he was Washington’s right hand at Cambridge.

Washington and Adams were nearly the same age, Washington, at forty-three, being just three years older. Powerfully built, he stood nearly a head taller than Adams—six feet four in his boots, taller than almost anyone of the day—and loomed over his short, plump wife. The three officers, in their beautiful buff and blue uniforms, were all that Adams might imagine when picturing himself as a soldier.

Yet even they were upstaged by the main attractions of the gathering, a dozen or more sachems and warriors of the Caughnawaga Indians in full regalia who had been invited to dine, together with their wives and children. Adams had been fascinated by Indians since boyhood, when the aged leaders of the Punkapaug and Neponset tribes had called on his father. But he shared with Washington and Gates a dread fear of the British unleashing Indian war parties on the frontiers, as had the French twenty years before. Recalling what he had read and heard, Adams had earlier written to a friend, “The Indians are known to conduct their wars so entirely without faith and humanity that it would bring eternal infamy on the Ministry throughout all Europe if they should excite those savages to war. . . . To let loose these blood hounds to scalp men and to butcher women and children is horrid.” Yet finding himself now unexpectedly in the actual presence of Indians was another matter, and he had a very different reaction.

The dinner, starting at two o’clock, was a diplomatic occasion. The Caughnawagas had come to offer their services to the Americans, and, gathered all about him, they presented a spectacle that Adams, to his surprise, hugely enjoyed. “It was a savage feast, carnivorous animals devouring their prey,” he wrote in his diary. “Yet they were wondrous polite. The general introduced me to them as one of the Grand Council Fire at Philadelphia, upon which they made me many bows and cordial reception.” To Abigail he reported himself decidedly pleased by the whole occasion.

What he could not risk telling her by letter was that the command at Cambridge had received the most heartening news, indeed the only good news, of the long, grim winter. An expedition led by young Henry Knox, a former Boston bookseller and colonel in Washington’s army, had been sent to Lake Champlain to retrieve the artillery captured by Ethan Allen at Fort Ticonderoga and haul the great guns back over the snow-covered Berkshire Mountains all the way to Boston, a task many had thought impossible. Now the “noble train” was at Framingham, twenty miles to the west. It was a feat of almost unimaginable daring and difficulty and, ironically, only made possible by the severity of the winter, as the guns had been dragged over the snow on sleds.

Mounted and on their way again the next morning, with the temperature still in the twenties, Adams and Bass were joined by a newly elected

Massachusetts delegate to Congress, young Elbridge Gerry. They rode out past the pickets and campfires of Cambridge and at Framingham stopped to see for themselves the guns from Ticonderoga, Adams making careful note of the inventory—58 cannon ranging in size from 3- and 4-pounders to one giant 24-pounder that weighed more than two tons. Clearly, with such artillery, Washington could change the whole picture at Boston.

The three riders pressed on through the grey and white landscape, making twenty to twenty-five miles a day. A cold journey,” Adams wrote. The weather was persistently wretched. There was more snow, wind, and freezing rain.

With dusk coming on by four in the afternoon and the bitter cold turning colder still, the glow and warmth of familiar wayside taverns was more welcome than ever. Under normal circumstances, Adams nearly always enjoyed such stops. He loved the food wild goose on a spit, punch, wine, bread and cheese, apples and a leisurely pipe afterward, while toasting himself by the fire. He picked up news, delighted in “scenes and characters,” as he said, enough Tor the amusement of Swift or even Shakespeare.”

It was in such places that he had first sensed the rising tide of revolution. A year before the first meeting of Congress in 1774, riding the court circuit, he had stopped one winter night at a tavern at Shrewsbury, about forty miles from Boston, and as he would recall for Benjamin Rush years afterward, the scene left a vivid impression.

. . . as I was cold and wet I sat down at a good fire in the bar room to dry my great coat and saddlebags, till a fire could be made in my chamber. There presently came in, one after another half a dozen or half a score substantial yeomen of the neighborhood, who, sitting down to the fire after lighting their pipes, began a lively conversation upon politics. As I believed I was unknown to all of them, I sat in total silence to hear them. One said, “The people of Boston are distracted.” Another answered, “No wonder the people of Boston are distracted; oppression will make wise men mad.” A third said, “What would you say, if a fellow should come to your house and tell you he was come to take a list of your cattle that Parliament might tax you for them at so much a head? And how should you feel if he should go out and break open your barn, to take down your oxen, cows, horses and sheep?” “What would I say,” replied the first, “I would knock him in the head.” “Well,” said a fourth, “if Parliament can take away Mr. Hancock’s wharf and Mr. Rows wharf, they can take away your barn and my house.” After much more reasoning in this style, a fifth who had as yet been silent, broke out, “Well it is high time for us to rebel. We must rebel sometime or other: and we had better rebel now than at any time to come: if we put it off for ten or twenty years, and let them go on as they have begun, they will get a strong party among us, and plague us a great deal more than they can now. As yet they have but a small party on their side.”

But now, at town after town, the atmosphere was edged with melancholy, the talk was of . . . the dire situation at Boston.

Snow lay deep most of the way. With drifts banked against buildings and stone walls, trees bare against the sky, the wind seldom still, no part of the journey was easy or uplifting to the spirits. Instead of welcoming committees and church bells, there was only the frozen road ahead.

The one bright note was young Gerry, who belonged to the so-called “codfish aristocracy” of Marblehead, his father having made a fortune shipping dried cod to Spain and the West Indies. Like Adams, indeed like every member of the Massachusetts delegation, Gerry was a Harvard graduate, a slight, birdlike man, age thirty-one, who spoke with a stammer and had an odd way of contorting his face, squinting and enlarging his eyes. But he was good company. Because of the family business, he had traveled extensively and was an ardent patriot. He and Adams talked all the way, making the journey, as Adams related to Abigail, considerably less tedious than it might have been. Their days together on the wintry road marked the start of what was to be a long, eventful friendship.

Like Adams, Gerry viewed mankind as capable of both great good and great evil. Importantly now, they were also of the same heart concerning what had to be done at Philadelphia.

Abigail had already said what John knew needed saying when, in November, a petition was circulated at home calling for reconciliation with Britain. “I could not join today in the petitions . . . for a reconciliation between our no longer parent state, by a tyrant state and these colonies,” she wrote. Then, making a slight but definite dash mark with her pen before continuing, as if to signify her own break from the past, she said, “Let us separate, they are unworthy to be our brethren.”

Passing through New York, Adams bought two copies of a small anonymous pamphlet, newly published under the title *Common Sense*. Keeping one, he sent the other on to her.

Adams and his two companions arrived at Philadelphia on Thursday, February 8, 1776, fifteen days after leaving Braintree.

His first letters from Abigail did not reach him until more than a month later and were filled with accounts of thrilling events. The American bombardment of Boston had begun March 2 and 3. “No sleep for me tonight,” she wrote, as the house trembled about her. On March 5 she described a more thunderous barrage: “the rattling of the windows, the jar of the house and the continuous roar of the 24-pounders.”

The night before, working at great speed, Washington’s men had moved the guns from Ticonderoga to commanding positions on the high ground of the Dorchester Peninsula, south of Boston, looking over Boston

Harbor and the British fleet. With hundreds of ox teams and more than a thousand American troops at work, breastworks had been set up and cannon hauled into place, all in a night and to the complete surprise of the British. Abigail was told that the British commander, on seeing what they had accomplished, remarked, “My God, these fellows have done more work in one night than I could make my army do in three months.”

Days of fearful tension followed until Sunday, March 17, St. Patrick's Day, when she went again to the top of Penns Hill to see a spectacle such as no one could ever have imagined—the British were abandoning Boston. General William Howe had struck an agreement with Washington. If allowed to depart in peace, the army would not leave Boston in flames.

The entire fleet, “the largest fleet ever seen in America,” was lifting canvas in a fair breeze and turning to the open sea. “You may count upwards of one hundred and seventy-sail,” she wrote. “They look like a forest.”

The British had been outwitted, humiliated. The greatest military power on earth had been forced to retreat by an army of amateurs; it was a heady realization. As would be said by the Duke of Manchester before the House of Lords, “The fact remains, that the army which was sent to reduce the province of Massachusetts Bay has been driven from the capital, and the standard of the provincial army now waves in triumph over the walls of Boston.”

With the departing fleet sailed a thousand Loyalists, many well known to John and Abigail Adams, including John's first mentor in the law, James Putnam of Worcester, and Samuel Quincy, brother of Hannah and Josiah, and Adams's opposing counsel in the Boston Massacre trials.

That such had come to pass, wrote Abigail, was surely the work of the Lord and “marvelous in our eyes.”