

***Thought, Care, and Money:* John Adams Assembles his Library**

Beth Prindle

“I am mostly intent at present, upon collecting a Library, and I find, that a great deal of Thought, and Care, as well as Money, are necessary to assemble an ample and well chosen Assortment of Books.”

Diary of John Adams, January 30, 1768

One bitter January night in 1768, a dejected young Boston lawyer turned to his diary to air a lengthy list of personal and professional grievances. Too much work. Too much travel. No leisure time. Little career focus or direction. Minimal assurance of any long-term financial, social, or professional success. At 32, John Adams was exhausted, overwhelmed, and adrift, and he confided in his journal a deep despair in ever finding enough time or tranquility in his current occupation to permit consideration of long-term personal goals and career ambitions. He was simply fighting to keep his head above water in his “*rambling, roving, vagrant, vagabond Life.*”¹

That particular Saturday evening, John Adams’s simmering frustration at his life’s direction—or lack thereof—had another root source. Amid his many professional pressures and personal commitments, Adams had decided to undertake an ambitious new project: the establishment of a personal library. It was an expensive, time-consuming, and difficult proposition, but most importantly, Adams was not at all certain of his ultimate goal in amassing a large collection of books: “*But when this is done, it is only a means, an Instrument. When ever I shall have compleated my Library, my End will not be answered. 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?*”²

From the beginning, John Adams approached book collecting as he did most things in life. Amassing a library was a purpose-driven decision, motivated by necessity, practicality,

¹ John Adams diary 15, 30 January 1768 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

² *Ibid.*

and ambition: personal enjoyment and self-education were not sufficient reasons in and of themselves (although he admitted they were certainly factors) for embarking on a venture that could prove so costly in time and money. Adams was very clear in that 1768 diary entry to define his potential ends for a library as externally rather than internally driven. For him, the ultimate determination of success or failure in this monumental venture—an undertaking which would last more than fifty years and result in a library totaling nearly 3,000 volumes collected over his lifetime—would be a results-oriented endeavor. Amassing the library alone offered no cause for celebration, for mere acquisition did not interest Adams in the slightest. It was what he could accomplish in the larger world with the aid of a rich collection of books that would serve as the true test.

John Adams's stated seven possible ends for a library--*Fame, Fortune, Power, God, Country, Clients, Fellow Men*—and all relied on outside “audiences” to pass judgment. Adams believed that the key to being defined as successful by these external parties was through the power of self-education and intellectual advancement. The first function of a book was as tool, not entertainment; as means, not end. He collected widely and read deeply because he believed in the transformational powers of books to distinguish the reader from his peers and elevate one's stature on many essential levels: intellectual, financial, social, moral, and spiritual. These were goals worth striving for. Book collecting—from first to last—was John Adams's pathway, not his destination.

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Most avid readers point to a particular book or experience in early childhood as the moment when their passion for the printed word was sparked, a childish joy which blossomed into full-fledged adoration for reading and books by the time one left elementary school. By this measure, John Adams was a late bloomer. While his love for books spanned scores of years during his incredibly long and bookish life, it cannot accurately be termed a “lifelong” affection. Growing up in Braintree, Massachusetts, young Adams was an indifferent scholar at best. As he later recounted in his diary, he was frustrated as a child by lazy, ineffectual teaching from a local schoolmaster and easily drawn to idler pursuits such as “*water mills, wind mills, whirly*

Giggs, Birds Eggs, Bows and Arrows, Guns, singing, pricking Tunes, Girls &c."³ At the age of thirteen, Adams begged his father to be allowed to stay home and farm rather than study for entrance to college. He loved the physically-challenging, agrarian life. It was only through his father's persistent intervention and the advent of new, kindly tutor that Adams was convinced to put aside his wishes to stay home and instead study for entrance to Harvard College. What a transformation would take place over the course of Adams's lifetime: from a young teen who plainly professed he "*did not love books*"⁴ to an octogenarian who sought to spend every available moment in his study, surrounded by his personal library. As Abigail Adams would write to son John Quincy shortly before her death, "*Your father's zeal for books will be one of the last desires which will quit him.*"⁵ Abigail knew John well. He was a man driven by passions, and books were one of the greatest of his passions.

From the earliest years, John Adams's early collecting practices reflected a methodical approach to knowledge acquisition: he acquired and read in the areas that represented his best chances for advancement in his current endeavor or occupation, regardless of personal preference for reading material. The few slim extant volumes from his teenage years all relate to early education and preparation for entrance to Harvard. These first books include a volume of Cocker's *Decimal Arithmetick* (1703), which Adams used to teach himself mathematics after a falling out with his schoolmaster; a 1738 Greek and Latin dictionary compiled by Cornelis Schrevel; and one of the best-known volumes in the Adams Library, the "little Cicero," his 1734 copy of Cicero's *Orationum Selectarum Liber: Editus in Usus Scholarum*. Adams exhibited great pride in book ownership as well: the Cicero's title page and front flyleaves boast his swaggering signature six times. This volume was a particular favorite of Adams's, and he believed the benefits of reading Cicero extended far beyond the intellectual: he wrote in his 1758 diary that he had lately been practicing the orations aloud because it was a "*noble Exercise. It exercises my*

³ John Adams diary 5, 31 May 1760. *AFP: Electronic Archive*. MHS.

⁴ John Adams autobiography, part 1, "John Adams," through 1776, sheet 2 of 53 [electronic edition]. *AFP: Electronic Archive*. MHS.

⁵ Abigail Adams to John Quincy Adams, 22 March 1816, *Adams Papers*, #430, Massachusetts Historical Society.

Lungs, raises my Spirits, opens my Pors, quickens the Circulations, and so contributes much to Health."⁶ The act of reading served as a means for improving mind and body simultaneously.

Following his graduation from Harvard in 1755, Adams spent a year as schoolmaster in Worcester. With little access to books or intellectual stimulation, he worried that all possibilities for personal and professional advancement were slipping from his grasp: "*I long to study sometimes, but have no opportunity. I long to be a master of Greek and Latin. I long to prosecute the mathematical and philosophical Sciences. I long to know a little of Ethicks and moral Philosophy. But I have no Books, no Time, no Friends. I must therefore be contented to live and die an ignorant, obscure fellow.*"⁷ It is hard to ascertain whether the threat of ignorance or obscurity troubled him more. Certainly, there were few opportunities for Adams to acquire books during this period: they were expensive, rare, and difficult to come by with his small salary and rural location, even by borrowing. Still, he remained ambitious and determined to do what he could to advance his learning and situation. He would make due with what he had: "*I am resolved to rise with the Sun and to study the Scriptures, on Thursday, Fryday, Saturday, and Sunday mornings, and to study some Latin author the other 3 mornings. Noons and Nights I intend to read English Authors... I will strive with all my soul to be something more than Persons who have had less Advantages than myself.*"⁸

A new career as lawyer and Adams's relocation to Braintree from Worcester offered significantly expanded prospects for expanding his intellectual and bibliographic horizons. In 1758, 23-year-old John Adams set down an ambitious reading plan for himself and outlined its three goals in his diary: "*What are the Motives that ought to urge me to hard study? The Desire of Fame, Fortune and personal Pleasure.*"⁹ He carefully included a list of subjects to which he should turn his attention, believing that the mastery of which would earn him esteem, admiration, and envy from his legal colleagues, as well as the "*Swarm of Clients who will furnish me with a plentiful*

⁶ John Adams diary 2, 21 December 1758 [electronic edition]. *AFP: Electronic Archive*. MHS.

⁷ John Adams diary 1, 24 April 1756 [electronic edition]. *AFP: Electronic Archive*. MHS.

⁸ John Adams diary 1, 21 July 1756 [electronic edition]. *AFP: Electronic Archive*. MHS.

⁹ John Adams diary, June 1753 - April 1754, September 1758 - January 1759 [entry undated] [electronic edition]. *AFP: Electronic Archive*. MHS.

Provision for my own Support, and for the Increase of my fortune."¹⁰ Yet money and celebrity alone would not suffice for him. By conscientiously studying Greek and Latin, French poetry, history, oratory, and natural and common law, Adams believed he would also gain the necessary authority to "*defend Innocence, to punish Guilt, and to promote Truth and justice among Mankind.*"¹¹ These were lofty goals, and grandly altruistic in scope. Yet Adams also admitted to an internal, much more personal motivation for reading as well; he longed for the "*active Acquisition of Knowledge, in a peaceful, undisturbed Retirement. Here I should moderate my Passions, regulate my Desires, increase my Veneration of Virtue, and Resolution to pursue it.*"¹² Focused reading would render him a better, more virtuous man (as well as a more financially and socially successful one). The selfish and the selfless could co-exist in an easy balance.

Adams did not independently develop his faith in the power of sustained reading and study for professional achievement. He was significantly influenced by Jeremiah Gridley, one of Boston's most successful lawyers in the mid-1700s and Adams's early mentor in the legal profession. It was Gridley who had emphasized to his young protégé in 1758 to "*pursue the Study of the Law rather than the Gain of it. Pursue the Gain of it enough to keep out of the Briars, but give your main Attention to the study of it... the application of a Man who aims to be a lawyer must be incessant. His Attention to his Books must be constant, which is inconsistent with keeping much Company.*"¹³ During their first meeting, Gridley intensively quizzed Adams on his prior studies and assigned him an ambitious list of required legal readings. Adams took the advice to heart and documented long lists of weighty law volumes to be read or re-read without delay: Justinian, Vinnius, Van Muyden, Wood, Cowell, Salkeld, Hawkins, Finch, Hale, Andrews, Reeves, Lilly, Coke, Littleton, Pufendorf, Grotius, Domat. It was a daunting task, but for Adams, the motivation to undertake this ambitious reading project was clear. It was a means to secure a clear professional advantage, to set himself apart from his contemporaries who had little basis of knowledge in civil law: "*Let me therefore distinguish myself from them, by the Study*

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ John Adams diary 2, 25 October 1758 [electronic edition]. *AFP: Electronic Archive*. MHS.

*of the Civil Law, in its native languages, those of Greece and Rome. I shall gain the Consideration and perhaps favour of Mr. Gridley and Mr. Pratt by this means.”*¹⁴

Adams steadfastly believed that the key to his personal and professional success—in the absence of other advantages such as significant financial resources or social standing—was contingent upon his commitment to dedicate himself to hard study. However, he often found it extraordinarily difficult to put that principle into practice. He counted himself his own worst enemy, unable to reconcile work and social demands (not to mention personal proclivities for girls and games) with the intense regimen of reading and reflection he had defined for himself. Adams’s strict resolutions in one diary entry, peppered with words like “*reformation*,” “*purpose*,” and “*fixt determination*” to embark on a particularly rigorous course of study, are invariably followed by entries filled with expressions of self-loathing and failure (“*rambling*,” “*stragglng*,” “*ignorant*,” “*uncultivated*,” “*sloth*,” “*negligence*,” “*idleness*”) in the next. Again and again, Adams lamented that he knew what needed to be done to make real intellectual and professional progress but felt himself unable to make significant headway because of perceived innate failings and external demands on his time and attention:

*“What is the Reason that I can’t remove all Papers and Books from my Table, take one Volume into my Hands, and read it, and then reflect upon it, till night, without wishing for my Pen and Ink to write a Letter, or taking down any other Book, or thinking of the Girls? Because I can’t command my attention.”*¹⁵

There were also professional relationships to build, and Adams knew close attention to reading could help form those bonds. In 1765, his mentor Gridley formed “the Sodality,” a weekly discussion group dedicated to the reading and analysis of classical points of law. Only a few select members from the Boston legal circle were asked to attend, and Adams was thrilled to be counted in their number. As he would write, “*I expect the greatest Pleasure from this sodality, that I ever had in my Life -- and a Pleasure too, that will not be painfull to my Reflection.*”¹⁶ It was an opportunity to read and discuss works with colleagues and to establish himself as a social, professional, and intellectual equal. Participation was something to be proud of, not a

¹⁴ John Adams diary 2, 5 October 1758 [electronic edition]. *AFP: Electronic Archive*. MHS.

¹⁵ John Adams diary 2, 5 October 1758 [electronic edition]. *AFP: Electronic Archive*. MHS.

¹⁶ John Adams diary 10, 24 January 1765, August 1765 [electronic edition]. *AFP: Electronic Archive*. MHS.

potential source of embarrassment. It also had a larger social and moral purpose, as well as professional: in an earlier diary entry, Adams had mused, “*how can I judge, how can any Man judge, unless his Mind has been opened and enlarged by Reading?*”¹⁷

Adams’s close association with Gridley also provided an additional, definitive advantage to the young lawyer: ready access to a host of law books that Adams could never have hoped to secure on his own at that stage in his career. Gridley frequently loaned the young lawyer volumes from his personal law library, and the value and intellectual worth of these recommended texts proved enduring and significant for Adams. Following Gridley’s death in 1767, Adams purchased from his mentor’s estate many of the same volumes he had borrowed a decade before. Thirty volumes in the John Adams Library at the Boston Public Library still bear Gridley’s signature.

With an increase in personal income, Adams also began actively buying books during this period, and he started to amass a significant law library of his own which included works from the leading English jurists: Matthew Hale (inscribed “1760” by Adams), George Croke (“1760”), Henry Homes Kames (“1767”), John Selden (“1768”), Edmund Plowden (“1769”), Thomas Vernon (“1770”), William Salkeld (“1770”), and John Fortescue (“1770”). Many of these volumes would play a significant role in Adams’s defense of the British soldiers during the December 1770 Boston Massacre trial. In his autobiography, Adams claimed that his early lack of books “*determined me to furnish myself, at any Sacrifice, with a proper Library: and Accordingly by degrees I procured the best Library of Law in the State.*”¹⁸ He took that challenge to heart, and the Adams Library today contains over 250 volumes related to law.

In 1771, Adams expanded his collecting practices and resolved to make a steady investment in books printed abroad. As he wrote in a letter to his nephew Isaac Smith in London:

“I want to agree with some Bookseller, of character, in whom I could entirely confide, to send me Books whenever I shall want them, and write for them, as long as I shall live. As I am a little inclined to be extravagant, in that kind of Entertainment, it is very

¹⁷ John Adams diary 7, 1 August 1761 [electronic edition]. *AFP: Electronic Archive*. MHS.

¹⁸ John Adams autobiography, part 1, “John Adams,” through 1776, sheet 7 of 53 [electronic edition]. *AFP: Electronic Archive*. MHS.

likely I may write for Books to the amount of twenty, perhaps thirty, Pounds sterling a year."¹⁹

He authorized the sending of all books on government and law as soon as they were published, and books began to enter the library more steadily. It was an investment that would prove risky and worrisome for Adams. Only a few years later, he would complain to Abigail in 1774, "*I have had the very richest Clients in the Province: Yet I am Poor in Comparison of Others...I ought however, to be candid enough to acknowledge that I have been imprudent. I have spent an Estate in Books.*"²⁰ Not only was the library not contributing to his fortune as he had hoped; it was instead eating into what savings he did have. The next year, his investment in books looked even more foolhardy as the fighting between British and colonial troops intensified and neared their home in Braintree. Worried that the library was in danger from the British army, Abigail temporarily moved it to Adams's brother's house in Randolph, Massachusetts. Adams lamented bleakly, "*Of the little Acquisitions I have made, five hundred Pounds sterling is sunk in Boston in a real Estate, four hundred sterling more is completely annihilated in Library that is now wholly lost to me.*"²¹ His investment of tens of thousands of dollars seemed to have vanished overnight; Adams's prospects appeared to be dimming, not brightening, with the acquisition of his book collection.

On top of his worries about expenses, Adams's appointment as a delegate to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia in 1774 did little to alleviate his old worries about negative social and professional ramifications from a continued lack of time and attention to his books. New interactions with highly-educated and wealthy colleagues from across the colonies drew out Adams's old insecurities. Nearing 40, he confessed to Abigail that he wished he were home so that he "*might be furbishing up my old Reading in Law and History, that I might appear with less Indecency before a Variety of Gentlemen, whose Educations, Travel, Experience, Family, Fortune, and every Thing will give them a vast Superiority to me, and I fear to some of my*

¹⁹ John Adams to Isaac Smith, 11 April 1771. *Adams Family Correspondence*, 1:51. MHS.

²⁰ John Adams to Abigail Adams, 29 June 1774, "I have a great Deal of Leisure..." [electronic edition]. *AFP: Electronic Archive*. MHS.

²¹ John Adams to Joseph Warren, 26 September 26 1775, *Papers of John Adams*, 3:95.

*Companions.*²² The farmer's son from Braintree keenly felt the powerful social, economic, and educational divide between himself and his fellow patrician delegates. He had a small amount of land, not much money, and certainly no particular social standing; in his mind the one option to distinguish himself and establish himself among his colleagues as a true and deserving peer was through his learning and intellect. And he continued to fear that he wasn't conscientious enough about knowledge acquisition to ensure that one distinction would be made clear.

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One of the most significant transformations in Adams's book collecting and reading practices emerged in the decade he spent in Europe as an American diplomat. When he was asked to serve as envoy in France in 1778 at the age of 43, John Adams boarded ship knowing little French and with little worldly experience other than that afforded by his legal circuit tours throughout New England and periodic tenures in Philadelphia at Congress. His library reflect that limited experience: it consisted primarily of Greek and Roman classics in multiple editions, a large body of English Common Law, a smattering of works ranging from religion to animal husbandry to beer brewing, and a growing number of pamphlets and books on revolution. Ten years later, Adams would return to the United States with a far more expansive world view borne of his lengthy experiences as diplomat in France, the Netherlands, and England. He also came home with crate upon crate of books which would take an unlucky John Quincy a day and a half to unpack.

Adams's decade in Europe marked his most prolific book-buying period and also signified the expansion of the library's contents to include a much greater scope in subject matter. He began collecting vast multi-volume sets of works, primarily in French: Voltaire; Rousseau; Condillac; Buffon; Frederick, King of Prussia; de Thou; Rousset de

²² John Adams to Abigail Adams, 30 June 1774, "I have nothing to do here..." [electronic edition]. *AFP: Electronic Archive*. MHS.

Missy; Condorcet. Modern philosophy and the science of government began to take hold as a significant percentage of Adams's book collecting budget. He also bought dictionaries by the armful, grammars, histories, guidebooks, dramas, atlases, and manuals on classical architecture and archeology.

The floodgates of intellectual curiosity had been opened. In a three month period alone in 1780, Adams notes in his "*Account of Books Purchased*" the acquisition of over twenty named titles (most of which represent multi-volume sets) for hundreds of livres, as well as several general, unspecified settlements of accounts with booksellers, most notably Charles-François Hochereau.

This flurry of book purchasing was due in part to one important development: Not only had Adams's political world expanded exponentially during his years abroad; so had his intellectual world. He now had access to huge quantities of books on a wealth of topics due to the density of booksellers in Paris and London; he also enjoyed developing personal relationships with many of the authors as well. In his diary, he casually noted dining regularly with French Enlightenment luminaries Gabriel Bonnot de Mably, Antoine Court de Gébeline, and Guillaume Thomas François Raynal; meeting famed theologian/scientist Joseph Priestley at John Stockdale's bookshop in London; and socializing frequently with Louis-Alexandre, Duc de La Rochefoucauld. When Adams later took to annotating his works with significant marginalia in the 1790s and beyond, he often returned to authors with whom he had a prior personal relationship, whether friendly or combative (although he invariably preferred a good argument). In many ways, his annotations are often simply continuations of earlier conversations: an oral discussion evolved into a written dialogue

Date	Description of Book	Price (Livres/Sols)
Jan 14	Paid Hochereau for Books	72 0 0
Jan 2	Paid do	7 0 0
11	Paid Hochereau for 4 volumes and 1 volume of the 1st edition	24 0 0
14	Paid Hochereau for 1 volume of the 1st edition of the 1st volume of the 1st edition	24 0 0
14	Paid Hochereau for 1 volume of the 1st edition of the 1st volume of the 1st edition	24 0 0
20	Paid Hochereau for 1 volume of the 1st edition of the 1st volume of the 1st edition	108 0 0
20	Paid Hochereau for 1 volume of the 1st edition of the 1st volume of the 1st edition	728 0 0
21	Paid Hochereau for 1 volume of the 1st edition of the 1st volume of the 1st edition	7 0 0
21	Paid Hochereau for 1 volume of the 1st edition of the 1st volume of the 1st edition	7 0 0
21	Paid Hochereau for 1 volume of the 1st edition of the 1st volume of the 1st edition	6 0 0
29	Paid Hochereau for 1 volume of the 1st edition of the 1st volume of the 1st edition	24 0 0
29	Paid Hochereau for 1 volume of the 1st edition of the 1st volume of the 1st edition	24 0 0
29	Paid Hochereau for 1 volume of the 1st edition of the 1st volume of the 1st edition	1 10 0
29	Paid Hochereau for 1 volume of the 1st edition of the 1st volume of the 1st edition	24 0 0
29	Paid Hochereau for 1 volume of the 1st edition of the 1st volume of the 1st edition	9 0 0
April 6	Paid Hochereau for 1 volume of the 1st edition of the 1st volume of the 1st edition	108 0 0
7	Paid Hochereau for 1 volume of the 1st edition of the 1st volume of the 1st edition	24 0 0
7	Paid Hochereau for 1 volume of the 1st edition of the 1st volume of the 1st edition	7 0 0
10	Paid Hochereau for 1 volume of the 1st edition of the 1st volume of the 1st edition	112 0 0
11	Paid Hochereau for 1 volume of the 1st edition of the 1st volume of the 1st edition	24 0 0
July 2	Paid Hochereau for 1 volume of the 1st edition of the 1st volume of the 1st edition	25 0 0

John Adams, *An Account of Books Purchased*, 1780. Massachusetts Historical Society

in the margins. The participants—and their staunch positions and fiery arguments—remained the same.

These frequent personal connections with writers (and booksellers) offered Adams a vital avenue for discussion and intellectual exploration in a social setting. The interactions were also extraordinarily influential in shaping what Adams purchased and read during this period. As he noted later, in his early quest to learn French, Adams

*“ had not engaged any Master and determined to engage none. I thought he would break in upon my hours in the necessary division of my time, between Business, and Study and Visits, and might often embarrass me. I had other reasons too, but none were sufficient to justify me. It was an egregious Error and I have seen cause enough to regret it. In Stead of a Master I determined to obtain the best Advice of those who were Masters of the Language, and purchase the Books which it was taught upon Principle.”*²³

He periodically obtained lengthy lists of recommended titles and authors from trusted French sources, and then proceeded immediately to a bookstore where he “*purchased them all and many more.*”²⁴ These author connections also provided Adams with another steady, far most cost-effective source of volumes for his library as well: he received scores of presentation copies, often personally inscribed on the front flyleaves with words of praise for Adams.

One notable development in Adams’s book selection process emerged during this decade in Europe and would continue for the rest of his life. Unlike many modern readers who gravitate toward books based upon personal affinity (political, religious, and/or social), Adams began amassing a sizeable number of works by authors with whom he passionately disagreed. In part, this appears an extension of his former occupation as lawyer; Adams adopted a “Know Thine Enemy” approach to his studies. He began collecting and reading heavily in areas where he knew he would face strong arguments counter to his own positions: in particular, his bookshelves bulged with works by eighteenth-century Enlightenment Europe idealists. For John Adams, the French *philosophes*’ faith in reason and the perfectibility of man as a stable foundation for government was particularly rankling. Instead, Adams held firmly that personal ambition would always overpower reason—history and his long experience in

²³ John Adams autobiography, part 2, “Travels, and Negotiations,” 1777-1778, sheet 13 of 37 [electronic edition]. *AFP: Electronic Archive*. MHS.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

politics had proven that reality time and again. Neither philosophy nor reason by itself could sustain a democratic and civil society governed by the rule of law: only the formal institution of checks could contain man's competitive instincts. The word "*Ballance*," scrawled repeatedly throughout his books on political science and philosophy, exemplifies Adams's philosophy. Force must be met with equal force by independent branches of government to prevent competing factions from getting an upper hand. In that vein, Adams himself met the force of the *philosophes'* arguments with the equal and opposite (he would claim superior) force of his own opinions and logic in the margins.

In addition to book buying for his own purposes, Adams also had the responsibility for overseeing portions of the education of son John Quincy (and later son Charles as well) while in Europe. The same high ambitions Adams felt for himself were mirrored in his expectations and hopes for his sons; from an early age, the Adams children had been indoctrinated in the greater moral and social good associated with reading. They had known nothing else. Abigail had noted as much in a 1774 letter when the children were very small and Adams was at the Continental Congress: "*Our Little Flock send duty. I called them separately and told them Pappa wanted to send them something and requested of them what they would have. A Book was the answer of them all... It was natural for them to think of a Book as that is the only present Pappa has been used to make them.*"²⁵ At the age of 10, young John Quincy wrote his father and begged for some advice as to how he should structure his study time. There is little doubt he was his father's son: "*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 endeavour to follow them I am dear Sir with a present determination of growing better.*"²⁶ Books were responsibilities, not frivolities, and must be treated as such.

Adams developed a particularly expensive book buying habit in England between 1785 and 1788. During his embassy to London, he focused his attentions on acquiring histories of the early Italian republics, including Florence, Venice, Naples, and Padua, to serve as historical source materials while he penned his famous *Defence of the Constitutions of the United States*, a

²⁵ Abigail Adams to John Adams, 14 May 1776 [electronic edition], *AFP: Electronic Archive*. MHS.

²⁶ John Quincy Adams to John Adams, 2 June 1777. *Adams Family Correspondence*, 2:254-255. MHS.

three-volume work first published in London in 1787-1788 and intended to influence the state delegates at the upcoming federal constitutional convention in Philadelphia. Adams spent a staggering sum on these volumes, most in folio form and dating from the 1530s through the 1750s. As Abigail Adams wrote to Cotton Tufts in 1787 from London: *“I should speak within Bounds if I was to say that the Books which Mr. Adams has purchased in order to qualify himself for a thorough investigation of the subjects he is pursuing, cost him within these six months a hundred and fifty Guineas. Many of the Italian works were very high priced and very scarce.”*²⁷ As with all his book acquisitions, Adams did not purchase these volumes with a collector’s eye, beautiful as many of them might be with their expensive paper and detailed engravings—their value for him lay in their contents. Like many of the books collected during this period abroad, these Italian histories also reflected Adams’s growing facility with foreign languages and commitment to their acquisition. In addition to scores of dictionaries, lexicons, and grammars, Adams’s library contents expanded during this period to include titles in eight languages: English, Greek, Latin, French, Spanish, Dutch, German, and Italian.

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After returning from Europe in 1788, Adams was home in Massachusetts for less than a year before again relocating, this time to New York to serve as the first vice president under George Washington. Once again, he was separated from his complete collection: there was no time or space to bring his entire library with him. Despite all the attention and money Adams had devoted to the creation of his library over the prior two decades, his full collection had never been completely accessible to him because of his nomadic life of political service: first to the Continental Congresses, then to Europe, and then to New York and Washington. Many of his books stayed in Braintree (later, Quincy), Massachusetts; he also generously made them available to friends and legal and political colleagues who requested use of volumes from the collection. Adams would not have full access to his complete library until he retired home to Quincy in 1801, a thirty-year separation.

²⁷ Abigail Adams to Cotton Tufts: 1 July, 1787, *Adams Family Correspondence*, 8:105. MHS.

As Vice President in New York, Adams did what he always did when he traveled: he chose a few selected volumes and asked Abigail to send them to him when possible: “*My Books some of them may come too. The Books I wish for are Hume, Johnson, Priestly, Ainsworth's Dictionary, and such other books as may be most amusing and useful.*”²⁸ From 1789-1801, the flood of book acquisitions that had previously characterized the decade he spent in Europe slowed appreciably during the twelve years in executive office. New volumes entered the collection periodically, and many were presentation copies inscribed to “Vice President Adams” and “President Adams” from admirers and friends. His shelves filled with eclectic works such as Benjamin Rush’s *Account of the Bilious Remitting Yellow Fever, as it Appeared in the City of Philadelphia, in the year 1793*, inscribed “*For John Adams, (to whose worth, and some titles can add nothing) from his old friend the Author*” and Sir Francis d’Ivernois’ *Des revolutions de France et de Geneve*. Presentation titles also included William Thornton’s *Cadmus, or A Treatise on the Elements of Written Language*, one of the earliest works on teaching the deaf to speak, and *Natural History of the Slug Worm* by William Dandridge Peck, a professor at Harvard. Some items were specifically bound for President Adams with ornate tooling and decoration. However, many of these gifts must have been put directly on the shelf after receipt and forgotten. It is clear that Adams did not read every volume in his collection; uncut pages are fairly common throughout the library, but they appear with the most frequency in books given to him by well-wishers (including the unfortunate Professor Peck’s volume on garden slugs).

The intensity of the business at hand left Adams less time to read than ever during his years as vice president and president, and there are only a few periods in his twelve years of executive office where he was able to apply himself with any regularity to reading. When he did, he devoted much of his attention to the French *philosophes*, and dated marginal annotations indicate that he picked up Rousseau in 1791 and 1794, the Abbe de Mably in 1791, William Playfair in 1796, Condorcet in 1798, and Rousseau again in 1800. It is during this decade that Adams begins to include substantial commentative notes in the margins of his books. He had been in the practice of writing marginal annotations for years, but his previous notes were

²⁸ John Adams to Abigail Adams, 24 May 1789 [electronic edition]. *AFP: Electronic Archive*. MHS.

primarily referential in nature: underlining, the writing of heads or keywords in the margin, and cross references. As of 1790, Adams writes extensive, detailed commentary in his books, personal reflections and powerful arguments that demonstrate an extraordinary engagement with the books and their authors. Over fifty volumes contain significant commentative marginalia by Adams; Mary Wollstonecraft's *Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution* (1794) boasts over 10,000 words in Adams's handwriting filling its pages.

Adams also continued to encourage his adult children to read and establish their own collections to better their own prospects and further their—and his—ambitions. When son Charles embarks on his law career in 1792, Adams hurries to help him amass a law library. He writes Abigail from New York, "*Charles has had some Business, and has argued and gained his first Case. It is no Small Thing to make the Beginning at the Bar. He wants Books and I must help him to purchase a few of the most necessary.*"²⁹ Adams sacrificed personally to make this purchase possible: he gave Charles his pair of coach horses to sell in order to underwrite the purchase. He also loaned his sons scores of volumes (and even entire collections); John Quincy Adams had previously borrowed almost all of the law books from his father's library as he set up his law practice some years before, and son Thomas Boylston would later follow suit in borrowing Adams's law library when he established his own practice in Philadelphia.

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John Adams's long retirement began in 1801 with his crushing loss in his presidential re-election campaign of 1800 to Jefferson and extended to 1826 when he died at the age of 90. This period offered Adams the first prospect for any serious leisure time since he entered college, and Adams took full advantage of the opportunity. Adams boasted to Jefferson at the age of 81 that "*For the last Year or two I have devoted myself to this kind of Study, and have read 15 volumes of Grimm, Seven volumes of Tuckers Neddy Search and 12 volumes of Dupuis besides a 13th of plates and Traceys Analysis, and 4. Volumes of Jesuitical History!*"³⁰ Without the benefit of modern conveniences, most notably electricity and good eyeglasses, the elderly New Englander managed

²⁹ John Adams to Abigail Adams, 2 December 1792 [electronic edition]. *AFP: Electronic Archive*. MHS.

³⁰ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 12 December 1816. Lester J. Cappon, ed. *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*. University of North Carolina Press: 1987.

to pour through over forty volumes in multiple languages... and brag about his impressive achievement to his Virginian friend.

Benjamin Rush may have facilitated the reunion of Adams and Jefferson in 1812 after a decade of ill feelings and deep resentments between the two men following the contentious 1800 presidential election. However, books would ultimately serve as the true bond joining Jefferson and Adams together in their later years. It was the gift of a book by Adams to Jefferson that marked their first exchange after years of icy silence: Adams sent a Jefferson a two-volume set of John Quincy Adams's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory*, which had recently been printed while his son served as professor at Harvard. Jefferson was touched by the gesture, and from this initial gift emerged a long and rich correspondence between the two lions of the early American republic, one that flourished until the death of both men on July 4, 1826. They compared reading lists, made recommendations for one another, liberally quoted from texts they were currently reading, and periodically sent gifts of books. After Adams lamented that Joseph Priestley had died before his *Doctrines on Heathen Philosophy* could be published, Jefferson responded: "*It is with great pleasure I can inform you that Priestly finished the comparative view of the doctrines of the Philosophers of antiquity, and of Jesus, before his death; and that it was printed soon after; and with still greater pleasure, that I can have a copy of his work forwarded from Philadelphia, by a correspondent there, and presented for your acceptance, by the same mail which carries you this, or very soon after.*"³¹ Soon after, the volume arrived on Adams's doorstep.

Jefferson was not the only benefactor contributing to Adams's library: Adams complained unconvincingly in 1817 that "*I have, however, either Friends who wish to amuse and solace my old age; or Enemies who mean to heap coals of fire on my head and kill me with kindness: for they overwhelm me with Books from all quarters, enough to obfuscate all Eyes, and smother and stifle all human Understanding.*"³² Apparently even their copious contributions were not enough, for Adams tellingly wrote of wanting more, ever more, for his library. He betrayed an acquisitiveness in the last decade of his life that was rarely seen in his younger years: perhaps it was because he had more time to enjoy the fruits of his library, or perhaps because the

³¹ Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 22 August 1816. Cappon, ed.: *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*.

³² John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 18 April 1817. Cappon, ed.: *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*.

intensive reading he was doing triggered interest in ever more and varied subjects and titles. Adams coveted the *Acta Sanctorum*, a work available only in Europe “*in forty seven Volumes in Folio. It contains the Lives of the Saints. It was compiled in the beginning of the 16th. Century by Bollandus, Henschenius and Papebrock. What would I give to possess in one immense Mass, One Stupendous draught all the Legends, true doubtful and false...*”³³ Sadly for Adams, his dream of possessing that monumental set did not come to pass. Regarding another title, he confessed that “*I wish I owned this Book and 100,000 more that I want every day, now when I am almost incapable of making any Use of them.*”³⁴ The “*Use*” of books and reading was still firmly fixed in his mind, even at his advanced age. However, the potential ends he had first identified for his library nearly fifty years prior—Fame, Fortune, Power, God, Country, Clients, Fellow Men—had either been attained or were now eternally out of reach. The pull of ambition had not been completely quenched, and never would be, but Adams had grown to become much more accepting of another potential “end” of reading: personal pleasure.

After a life spent acquiring his immense book collection at untold personal and financial sacrifice, John Adams had an important decision to make: how to disburse a personal library that totaled approximately 3,000 volumes. When Jefferson sold 6,707 volumes from his personal library to the Library of Congress in 1816, Adams wrote, “*I envy you that immortal honor.*”³⁵ Most libraries of the period were bequeathed to family members or sold to pay off debts, but at the age of 86, Adams deeded 2,742 volumes from his collection in 1822 to the Adams Academy, a boys’ preparatory school, in Quincy, Massachusetts. Unlike Jefferson, he received no money from the transaction.

On so many levels, John Adams’s personal library represented his fortune. It was his golden ticket. With the exception of the family home and property, these books were the most valuable things he owned. By giving his collection to the people of Quincy, Adams believed he was passing on those riches—and, more importantly, the possibilities that they afforded—to

³³ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, Feb[-March 3] 1814. Cappon, ed.: *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*.

³⁴ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 25 April 1813. Cappon, ed.: *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*.

³⁵ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 14 October 1814. Cappon, ed.: *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*.

the larger public. His library was his legacy. By offering free and frequent interaction with his well-loved, well-used collection, his community would have the same opportunities for personal transformation and elevation that he had had. He was a farmer's kid from Braintree who became president of the United States. Others could choose to do with it what they would. John Adams was merely providing the tools; it was up to the thousands of readers who would follow in his footsteps to apply the means to the end.

Following his death, Adams's library became nearly as peripatetic as its original owner. Plans for the Adams Academy languished and the books, stored in a drafty outbuilding behind the family home, remained unused for two decades after his death. In 1848, John Adams's grandson Charles Francis Adams arranged to transfer the collection to the Quincy Town House and later to the Town Hall. After the Adams Academy was finally completed in 1870, the books were installed briefly before they were again moved to the new Thomas Crane Library in Quincy. Family members and friends continued to donate volumes previously owned by Adams as well as new materials. The Adams Library came to the Boston Public Library in 1894, where it is currently housed in the BPL's Rare Books & Manuscripts Department.