

## MEMORIES OF GREATNESS: THE ADAMS - JEFFERSON CORRESPONDENCE

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**Abstract:** The two men who drafted the Declaration of Independence, two of the Founding Fathers who served the new Republic as its second and third president. 157 letters spanning half a century. An intellectual dialogue encapsulating private grief and joy as well as the general concerns, interests and debates of their time. In short, the exemplary memories of two larger-than-life personalities who set a pattern for civility, mutual respect and admiration despite severe political differences. The excellent prose of their late years occasioned by their reconciliation in 1812 provides insightful comments into the birth of the young nation and their contribution to it, at the same time affording engaging, lively portraits of the two men against the rich tapestry of their time.

The diversity of the issues approached in their mutually enjoyed correspondence brings the reader closer to the challenges of political philosophy and leadership at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and paints a realistic picture of a comprehensive range of issues, from social to domestic, descriptive of the young nation's growing pains and its formative years.

The Adams-Jefferson letters retain their exemplary value to the modern reader who may find them highly inspirational through the civic engagement, patriotic fervor, and long-term respect for diversity both politicians, diplomats, and friends were able to maintain throughout their exceptionally long and productive lives, that came to an end the same day, the day of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Beyond the civic commitment the letters reveal, the elegant, erudite yet graceful prose will further captivate the reader. Add to this the mild self-derogatory style and the frequent instances of humor and accepting wit and you will have the full picture of two men of impressive intellectual, ethical and political stature engaged in friendly conversation with one another and with posterity.

### The Exemplary Past

"There are only few people in the world today who have both the patience and the inclination to read 600 pages worth of 200-year-old letters" (Austin 12). This may hold true for most people, but it is indeed a rare privilege to be able to re-visit two of the Founding Fathers at a time of detachment and serenity, as they reflect on their lives and accomplishments in shaping a nation. In 1812 when they resumed their friendship and correspondence they were both in their late years and they would constantly reflect on the

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\* Fulbright Commission; Romania

early days of the young nation they helped establish and on the role they played in the momentous events that, 200 years later, are still perceived as defining the American spirit and the emerging nation. As such, the Adams-Jefferson letters are personally revealing accounts of the two men, their personalities and their contribution to the birth of the new nation. The letters also serve as historically informative accounts of the tumultuous times they lived in, contributing their own views and justification of the events they were part of.

Beyond the rich social and historic tapestry they depict, the Adams-Jefferson letters are to the modern reader a most welcome excursion into a political environment that appears to accommodate the diversity of opinions, allowing former foes and political opponents to become friends over high-principled issues, the common good, and a shared philosophy of life. Friends, then foes and finally friends again, both Adams and Jefferson were highly educated and reflective individuals, able to write an elegant, urbane prose expressing an intellectually sophisticated approach to life in all its complexity, both at a personal and a civic, nation-wide level. The two great men retained their interest in public affairs to the last day, but the later years when they were no longer involved in public activities granted them the peace and detachment for observations, reflections and comments.

Beyond the beauty of the balanced prose – “the classical purity of Jefferson’s writing was influenced by his translations of the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles” (*New Standard Encyclopedia* J-46) – the letters impress the modern reader and witness of political differences through the elevated civic engagement of their authors that was carried throughout their long and productive years and through the classical elegance and poised attitude towards diverging opinions. It is a lesson we need to re-learn and what better teachers could we have than these two great men and their brilliant epistolary exchanges documenting the last 15 years of their renewed friendship and of their rich lives?

### Greatness Revisited

In Ezra Pound’s words, “from 1760 to 1826 two civilized men lived and to a considerable extent reigned in America” (*The Jefferson-Adams Correspondence* 314).

The two men that Ezra Pound describes as “civilized” and reigning in the newly created state were actually its second and third president. They both served with distinction in their capacity as members of the drafting committee for the Declaration of Independence and, apparently, it was Adams who recommended Jefferson as the man to write the first draft of the Declaration of Independence.

As posterity will attest, the Declaration ranks as a monument to the new nation and the pre-amble that Jefferson worded so powerfully stands as a time-honored and enduring statement of human rights, with “all men are created equal” unanimously viewed as a hallmark statement of democratic principles and a most well-loved and best-known statement in English.

Jefferson valued his contribution to the Declaration of Independence among his top three achievements and in the epitaph he designed for himself he takes pride in the place:

Here was buried Thomas Jefferson  
Author of the Declaration of American Independence  
Of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom  
And father of the University of Virginia. (*New Standard Encyclopedia* J-51)

Both of solid education and versatile interests, Adams and Jefferson worked shoulder to shoulder for American independence and put their multiple talents in the service of the newly created nation by accepting various responsibilities that ranged from first Secretary of State in US history (Jefferson) to first vice-president (Adams). Statesmen, diplomats, and leading advocates of American independence, Jefferson and Adams rose to prominence in the early days of the revolution when they acted as delegates from Massachusetts (Adams) and Virginia (Jefferson) to the Continental Congress and took vigorous action in persuading the Congress to declare independence from Great Britain.

Interested in political theory and history, both Adams and Jefferson were responsible for writing cornerstone documents of the states they represented, be it its very Constitutions, as was the case with Adams in Massachusetts, or the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom, in Jefferson's case.

Men of intellectual distinction and patriotic fervor who worked diligently, side by side, to promote the new state with the European powers, they both acted as ambassadors of the newly forged United States of America to France, with Adams preceding Jefferson in this capacity and then serving in London.

At first look Jefferson overwhelms the modern man through the vast range of his interests and accomplishments. But Adams is by no means the lesser man in the intellectual partnership that their correspondence rests on. With all the ups and downs in the earlier stages of their relationship, Jefferson always had words of praise for Adams' contribution to the making of the new nation: any random quoting from his correspondence will reveal his steady appreciation of Adams' indefatigable efforts in support of independence: "He supported the Declaration with zeal and ability, fighting fearlessly for every word of it" (1823). "He was a powerful advocate on the floor of Congress" (1811). He was "the pillar of support on the floor of Congress, its ablest advocate and defender against the multifarious assaults it encountered" (1822) (*Thomas Jefferson Encyclopedia*).

Equal appreciation, respect and value did Adams attach to Jefferson. The high esteem in which he held Jefferson after a life in which they were often separated by "different conclusions we had drawn from our political reading", as Jefferson put it (*Thomas Jefferson Encyclopedia*) echoes in Adams' last words: "Jefferson survives". Little does it matter that at the time they were uttered on July 4 1826, Jefferson had been dead for several hours.

The United States was celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary on the day two of the Founding Fathers left this world with different exit speeches. Jefferson stated that "I have done for my country, and for all mankind, all that I could do, and I now resign my soul, without fear, to my God". With all the grudging admiration between the two, Adams last words project Jefferson as his would-be spiritual heir and survivor.

Adams and Jefferson, two men of impressive stature who impacted their time through their vision, work, and talent, in later life chose to reflect, analyze and explain their deeds and convictions in their correspondence. As to their contribution and notoriety, Daniel Webster captured it all in his August 2 1826 speech delivered in Boston in commemoration of Adams' and Jefferson's death: "Their fame, indeed, is secure. That is now treasured up beyond the reach of accident ... for with American liberty it rose, and with American liberty only can it perish" (Cappon 10). He also reflected on the highlights of American history which the two great men were part of and derived "prospect of an immortality in the memories of all the worthy" (Cappon 1).

### **Greatness Remembered: Their Late Correspondence 1812–1826**

To take Ezra Pound's perspective again, "nothing surpasses the evidence that CIVILIZATION WAS in America, than the series of letters exchanged between Jefferson and Adams, during the decade of reconciliation after their disagreements" (*The Jefferson-Adams Letters* 136). "Not only were they level and CONTEMPORARY with the best minds of Europe but they entered into the making of that mind. Chateaubriand did not come to Philadelphia to lecture, he came to learn" (*ibid.* 143).

And, finally, his critical assessment: "They both wrote an excellent prose which has not, so far as I know, been surpassed in our fatherland..." (*ibid.* 314)

The times that saw the birth of the new nation were rich in men of great mold and remarkable caliber. Of exemplary scope, vibrancy, and civic engagement, the personalities of the Independence years look larger than life to the common man of today. And still Adams and Jefferson stand out. What really made Adams and Jefferson stand out from the other fascinating individuals of the era was their mutual correspondence between 1812–1826. Their letters are witty, often profound, and always revealing. They display their wonderful self-conscious and always interesting reflections about the era and their roles in it. (*American Experience*, Ambrose)

Their relationship was defined by serene longevity and a sense of history made and shared. Both of them lived long and productive lives and, until the end, were held in high esteem and were looked upon as living mementos of the grand Independence times. The Adams-Jefferson correspondence tells a unique story of reconciliation in U.S. history: a story of severe political differences that never stifled the respect and mutual admiration that lay at the foundation of their early friendship at the time of the struggle for Independence.

After friendship was suspended between 1801–1812 as Jefferson ran against Adams in the presidential elections and Adams failed to win a second presidential term, age helped them mellow out and overcome their bitter political differences. Reconciliation was welcomed by both great men and flourished into an exchange of almost 60 letters spanning close to 15 years of reflection, wisdom, wit, and acceptance. They also occasioned reminiscences about their contributions to the making of the new nation, as well as light-hearted, affectionate exchanges on myriad topics.

What started as “You and I ought not to die before we have explained ourselves to each other” (Adams to Jefferson, 1813) (*Thomas Jefferson Encyclopedia*) soon developed into a mutually appreciated joy: “Intimate Correspondence with you...is one of the most agreeable Events in my Life”, as effusive Adams put it (Adams to Jefferson, 1818) (*Thomas Jefferson Encyclopedia*). In his turn, Jefferson was always quick to reciprocate, as attested by the letter cited *in extenso* at the end of this section. He also revealed his affection and appreciation of Adams in a letter from January 30 1787 to James Madison in which he stated that Adams

is vain, irritable and a bad calculator of the force and probable effect of the motives which govern men. This is all the ill which can possibly be said of him. He is as disinterested as the being which made him: he is profound in his views and accurate in his judgment except where knowledge of the world is necessary to form a judgment. He is so amiable, that I pronounce you will love him if you ever become acquainted with him. (*Thomas Jefferson Encyclopedia*)

Once the correspondence and friendship revived in 1812, their letters were an opportunity to explain their version of the Revolution, thus helping to shape the memory and meaning of the nation’s formative years. In addition, their late correspondence leaves a record of the two men’s understanding of their individual and collective achievements. Valuable at two different levels, the correspondence offers historical and political insights into the period as well as insights into the inner workings of the minds of the two former Presidents of the United States. To the reader’s surprise and delight, their correspondence also brings them to life more effectively than any historian could ever dream of accomplishing.

Rebuilding their friendship in old age – at the time of their late correspondence Adams was 77 to 91 years old and Jefferson was 69 to 83 years old – they were able to highlight and cherish the good in each other, both personally and politically. After all, they had so much in common:

Their generation had passed; they were, in a sense, the relics of an earlier era and they reached out to each other in their old age. Both men wanted to reminisce, to recapture the richness of the revolutionary experience and they turned to one another. Like many people who reach old age, they came to see that their differences were less important than their shared experiences. (*American Experience*, Berkin)

Despite their intense political differences before and after the turbulent elections of 1800 which turned them into “ardent political foes” (*American Experience*, Freeman), they still managed to maintain respect, appreciation and even some affection for each other.

By the time of their retirement, the two men had known each other for well over 30 years; they had toiled together for American independence. When they stepped out of public life permanently, they gained some distance from their partisan differences, and their personal fondness for one another came back to the fore. Their correspondence during this period is a remarkable look back at the most formative years of the nation’s founding from two personal points of view, told by two of the most active participants in

the period's major political events. The humor and humanity in many of these letters is sometimes quite moving. (*American Experience*, Freeman)

The depth of the mutual affection and respect that the letters reveal after all the bitterness of their earlier political feud might be interpreted as indicative of their superior nature, fine education and also of the strength of the bond they had built through their civic service to the young nation. The high point of their late friendship is undoubtedly Jefferson's letter on Adams' loss of his wife whom Jefferson himself had held in high esteem from the very beginning of his relationship with Adams in the early days of the fight for independence. The elegance and beauty of his heart-felt prose is equally remarkable almost 200 years later:

Tried myself, in the school of affliction, by the loss of every form of connection which can drive the human heart, I know well, and feel what you have lost, what you have suffered, are suffering, and have yet to endure. The same trials have taught me that, for ills so immeasurable, time and silence are the only medicines. I will not, therefore, by useless condolences, open afresh the sluices of your grief nor, altho' mingling sincerely my tears with yours, will I say a word more, where words are vain, but that it is of some comfort to us both that the term is not very distant at which we are to deposit, in the same cerement, our sorrows and suffering bodies, and to ascend in essence to an ecstatic meeting with the friends we have loved and lost and whom we shall still love and never lose again. God bless you and support you under your heavy affliction. (1818) (*Thomas Jefferson Encyclopedia*)

Their exchanges could also be lighter in tone and occasionally humorous and self derisive, attesting to the strength of the relationship and the deep respect and appreciation underlying it. Two letters of the auspicious 1812 that saw the revival of their friendship are telling examples. In addition, they sample the attitude they were to bring to their correspondence over their ensuing final 14 years and the meaning they attached to these epistolary exchanges:

1812, January 21: Jefferson to Adams

A letter from you calls up recollections very dear to my mind. It carries me back to the times when, beset with difficulties and dangers, we were fellow laborers in the same cause, struggling for what is most valuable to man, his right of self-government. Laboring always at the same oar, with some wave ever ahead threatening to overwhelm us and yet passing harmless under our bark, we knew not how, we rode through the storm with heart and hand, and made a happy port...

But whither is senile garrulity leading me? Into politics, of which I have taken final leave. I think little of them, and say less. I have given up newspapers in exchange for Tacitus and Thucydides, for Newton and Euclid; and I find myself much the happier. Sometimes indeed I look back to former occurrences, in remembrance of our old friends and fellow laborers, who have fallen before us. Of the signers of the Declaration of Independence I see now living not more than half a dozen on your side of the Potomak, and, on this side, myself alone. You and I have been wonderfully spared, and myself with remarkable health, and a considerable activity of body and mind. I am on horseback 3 or 4 hours of every day; visit 3 or 4 times a year a possession I have 90 miles distant, performing the winter journey on horseback. I walk little however; a single mile being too much for me; and I live in the midst of my grandchildren, one of whom has lately promoted me to be a great grandfather. (*From the Correspondence*)

1812, February 3: Adams to Jefferson

Your Memoranda of the past, your Sense of the present and Prospect for the Future seem to be well founded, as far as I see. But the Latter i.e. the Prospect of the Future, will depend on the Union: and how is that Union to be preserved? Concordia Res oparvae crescunt, Discordia Maximae dilabuntur...The Union is still to me an Object of as much Anxiety as ever Independence was. To this I have sacrificed my Popularity in New England and yet what Treatment do I still receive from the Randolphs and Sheffleys of Virginia. By the Way are not these Eastern Shore Men? My Senectutal Loquacity has more than retaliated your "Senile Garrulity..."

I walk every fair day, sometimes 3 or 4 miles. Ride now and then but very rarely more than 10 or 15 Miles... I have the Start of you in Age by at least ten Years; but you are advanced to the Rank of a Great Grandfather before me." (*Ibid.*)

## Greatness Perceived

"This is one of the most remarkable stories of reconciliation in our history and proof that severe political differences do not have to be an absolute bar to respect, civility and friendship", according to Michael Austin. The reconciliation of 1812 untapped an all-embracing correspondence "that has no counterpart in any other period of American intellectual history" (Cappon 8).

The Adams-Jefferson letters are occasionally mundane and light hearted, but mostly concerned with philosophical and political issues. Two fine intellectuals of comparable natural endowment, intellectual background, and formal training, they both rely on the classics, especially on literature and history, to illustrate and support their views.

Both great men devoted a significant part of their time to reading and writing. They both valued books and found them indispensable to their intellectual well-being. Jefferson's statement "I cannot live without books" that he made after selling his library to the U.S. Government, thus laying the foundation of the Library of Congress, is adequately echoed by Adams eagerly admitting that "I wish I owned this Book and 100,000 more that I want every day" (Cappon 9).

Their correspondence spanned their 15 final years. Their death on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July 1826 when the United States was celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Declaration of Independence is full of meaning to the modern reader. Their contemporaries honored them a month later when the famous orator Daniel Webster commemorated them in Boston in Faneuil Hall, the very "Cradle of Liberty". His speech highlighted Adams' and Jefferson's contribution to the making of the new nation, their greatness and the respect in which the nation held them both:

No two men now live, fellow-citizens, perhaps it may be doubted, whether any two men have ever lived, in one age, who, more than those we now commemorate, have impressed their own sentiments, in regards to politics and government, on mankind, have infused their own opinion more deeply into the opinions of others, or given a more lasting direction to the current of human thought. Their work does not perish with them... No age will come, in which the American Revolution will appear less than it is, one of the greatest events in human history. (Cappon 1)

Inextricably linked to the American Revolution and constantly re-evaluated by historians, Adams and Jefferson maintain their stature to this day. Their correspondence preserves their rich, multi-faceted relationship as well as their convictions and thoughts.

To end with a representative sample of the richness preserved in it, what better excerpt than Jefferson's response to a reflective question posed by Adams:

You ask if I would agree to live my 70 or rather 73 years over again? To which I say Yea. I think with you that it is a good world on the whole, that it has been framed on a principle of benevolence... I steer my bark with Hope in the head, leaving Fear astern. (1816) (*Thomas Jefferson Encyclopedia*)

Or, as dry dictionaries and encyclopedias put it: "John Adams, a former foe, became a good friend of Jefferson in 1811. The letters they exchanged during Jefferson's final Monticello years make a notable contribution to American history and literature" (*New Standard Encyclopedia* J-33). They also make a most enriching contribution to the reader's knowledge and fond appreciation of the two towering personalities that come to life through their correspondence, as does the new republic, with the challenges and tribulations of its first half century of democratic life.

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