

Lesson Six

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson reconcile.

Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- 1) Explain how John Adams and Thomas Jefferson became friends again.
- 2) Show how Adams's and Jefferson's common beliefs illustrate the commonly held beliefs of the American people, and have served as the glue that has allowed the United States to survive and prevail, despite the varying beliefs that sometimes threaten to tear the nation apart.

Materials

- 1) **6.1:** The 1804 letters between Abigail Adams and Thomas Jefferson which attempt unsuccessfully to clear the air.
- 2) **6.2:** The renewed correspondence between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson.

Lesson Outline

- Cover for the class John Adams's last minute judicial appointments at the end of his administration.
- Cover for the class the "Revolution of 1800." Show how it was not really a revolution, and that Jefferson kept a lot of the policies twelve years of Federalist rule had put in place.
- Read with the class **6.1**. Ask the students: 1) What are Jefferson's complaints against John Adams? 2) What does Abigail say in defense of her husband? What criticism does Abigail have for Jefferson?
- Break the class into five groups. Have groups read letters from **6.2**. The groups will write down what their letters say. Call on each group. Groups will report the contents of their letters to the class.
- Use what the student groups report to paint for the class a picture of the common bond Jefferson and Adams shared in their basic belief in America that transcended their political differences.

6.1

The 1804 letters between Abigail Adams and Thomas Jefferson.

Introduction

In 1804, Thomas Jefferson's twenty-five year old daughter Polly died. Abigail had taken care of Polly for a time in London when she was a little girl (see Lesson Three 3.3.). Despite the ill feelings between the Adamses and Jefferson, Abigail was moved by emotion to write a letter of condolence. What followed were several letters back and forth where Jefferson made an attempt to explain his political actions, and patch up his relationship with John and Abigail.

Abigail Adams to Thomas Jefferson, May 20, 1804
The Adams-Jefferson Letters, pages 268–269

Quincy May 20th 1804

SIR

Had you been no other than the private inhabitant of Monticello, I should e'er this time have address you, with that sympathy, which a recent event has awakened in my Bosom. But reasons of various kinds withheld my pen, until the powerfull feelings of my heart, have burst through the restraint, and called upon me to shed the tear of sorrow over the departed remains, of your beloved and deserving daughter, an event which I most sincerely mourn.

The attachment which I formed for her, when you committed her to my care: upon her arrival in a foreign Land: has remained with me to this hour, and the recent account of her death, which I read in a late paper, brought fresh to my remembrance the strong sensibility she discovered, tho but a child of nine years of age at having been separated from her Friends, and country, and brought, as she expressed it, "to a strange land amongst strangers." The tender scene of her seperation from me, rose to my recollection, when she clung around my neck and wet my Bosom with her tears, saying, "O! now I have learnt to Love you, why will they tear me from you."

It has been some time since that I conceived of any event in this Life, which could call forth, feelings of mutual sympathy. But I know how closely entwined around a parents heart, are these chords which bind the filial to the parental Bosom, and when snapped asunder, how agonizing the pangs of seperation¹.

¹ John and Abigail's son Charles Adams died in 1800.

I have tasted the bitter cup, and bow with reverence, and humility before the greater dispenser of it, without whose permission, and over ruling providence, not a sparrow falls to the ground. That you may derive comfort and consolation in this day of your sorrow and affliction, from that only source calculated to heal the wounded heart—a firm belief in the Being: perfections and attributes of God, is the sincere and ardent wish of her, who once took pleasure in subscribing Herself your Friend

ABIGAIL ADAMS

Thomas Jefferson to Abigail Adams, June 13, 1804
Excerpted from *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, pages 269–271

Washington June 13.04.

DEAR MADAM

The affectionate sentiments which you have the goodness to express in your letter of May 20. towards my dear departed daughter, have awakened in me sensibilities natural to the occasion, and recalled your kindness to her which I shall ever remember with gratitude and friendship. I can assure you with truth they had made an indelible impression on her mind, and that, to the last, on our meetings after long separations, whether I had heard lately of you, and how you did, were among the earliest of her enquiries. In giving you this assurance I perform a sacred duty for her, and at the same time am thankful for the occasion furnished me of expressing my regret that the circumstances should have arisen which have seemed to draw a line of separation between us. [...] Mr. Adams's friendship and mine began at an earlier date. It accompanied us thro' long and important scenes. The different conclusions we had drawn from our political reading and reflections were not permitted to lessen mutual esteem, each party being conscious they were the result of an honest conviction in the other. Like differences of opinion existing among our fellow citizens attached them to the one or the other of us, and produced a rivalry in their minds which did not exist in ours. [...] I can say with truth that one act of Mr. Adams's life, and one only, ever gave me a moment's personal displeasure. I did consider his last appointments to office² as personally unkind. They were from among my most ardent political enemies, from whom no faithful cooperation could ever be expected, and laid me under the embarrassment of acting thro' men whose views were to defeat mine; or to encounter the odium of putting others in their places. [...] If my respect for him did not permit me to ascribe the whole blame to the influence of others, it left something for friendship to forgive, and after brooding over it for some little time, and not always resisting the expression of it, I forgave it cordially, and returned to the same state of esteem and respect for him which had so long subsisted. [...] That you may both be favored with health, tranquility and long life, is the prayer of one who tenders you the assurances of his highest consideration and esteem.

TH: JEFFERSON

² Adams's last minute judicial appointments.

Quincy July 1st 1804

SIR

Your Letter of June 13th came duly to hand; if it had contained no other sentiments and opinions than those which my Letter of condolence could have excited, and which are expressed in the first page of your reply, our correspondence would have terminated here: but you have been pleased to enter upon some subjects which call for a reply: and as you observe that you have wished for an opportunity to express your sentiments, I have given to them every weight they claim.

[...]

I have never felt any enmity towards you Sir for being elected president of the United States. But the instruments made use of, and the means which were practised to effect a change, have my utter abhorrence and detestation, for they were the blackest calumny, and foulest falsehoods. I had witnessed enough of the anxiety, and solicitude, the envy jealousy and reproach attendant upon the office as well as the high responsibility of the Station, to be perfectly willing to see a transfer of it. And I can truly say, that at the time of Election, I considered your pretensions much superior to his [Mr. Burr's], to whom an equal vote was given. Your experience I venture to affirm has convinced you that it is not a station to be envy'd. [...] I rely upon the Friendship you still profess for me, and (I am conscious I have done nothing to forfeit it), to excuse the freedom of this discussion to which you have led with an unreserve, which has taken off the Shackles I should otherways have found myself embarrassed with.—And now Sir I will freely disclose to you what has severed the bonds of former Friendship, and placed you in a light very different from what I once viewed you in.

One of the first acts of your administration was to liberate a wretch³ who was suffering the just punishment of the Law due to his crimes for writing and publishing the basest libel, the lowest and vilest Slander, which malice could invent, or calumny exhibit against the Character and reputation of your predecessor, of him for whom you profess the highest esteem and Friendship, and whom you certainly knew incapable of such complicated baseness. The remission of Callenders fine was a public approbation of his conduct. [...]

Until I read Callenders seventh Letter containing your compliments to him as a writer and your reward of 50 dollars, I could not be made to believe, that such measures could have been resorted to: to stab the fair fame and upright intentions of one, who to use your own Language “was acting from an honest conviction in his own mind that he was right.” This Sir I considered as a personal injury. This was the Sword that cut asunder

³ Republican essayist James Thomson Callender who had written a scathing attack on John Adams (see Lesson Four, 4.2) and had been jailed and fined under the Alien and Sedition Act. When Jefferson was elected president he pardoned Callender and remitted his fine.

the Gordian knot, which could not be untied by all the efforts of party Spirit, by rivalry by Jealousy or any other malignant fiend.

[...] Often have I wished to have seen a different course pursued by you. I bear no malice I cherish no enmity. I would not retaliate if I could-nay more in the true spirit of christian Charity, I would forgive, as I hope to be forgiven. And with that disposition of mind and heart, I subscribe the Name of

ABIGAIL ADAMS

6.2

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson set party rivalry aside and make up.

Introduction

President Jefferson's tenure in office lasted until 1809 when he left public life for good and retired to Monticello. He and John Adams had not communicated with each other in eight years. Five years before, Abigail Adams and Thomas Jefferson had aired their differences but had failed to reestablish the friendly relationship the two had enjoyed for many years. Would the political baggage keep Adams and Jefferson apart for the rest of their lives? A close friend of both men, Dr. Benjamin Rush, sincerely hoped it would not, and in 1809 he began his own conspiracy to bring the two heroes of the Revolution back together. He was aided in this effort by Edward Coles, secretary to President Madison and neighbor of Jefferson, who had visited Adams while on a tour of New England. Adams had told Coles in passing conversation that, "I always loved Jefferson" and "still love him." This sentiment was relayed to Jefferson and it pleased him. He had thought Abigail's response to his correspondence five years prior had proven that the Adams family wanted nothing to do with him. Adams's statement of good feelings convinced Jefferson that reconciliation was possible. So when he received his old friend's letter of January 1, 1812 he was eager to respond. This started a correspondence that lasted until the two men died in 1826. The old wounds had healed and the two patriots looked to the past with nostalgia and to the future of America with great hope.

John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, January 1, 1812
The Adams-Jefferson Letters, page 290

Quincy January 1st. 1812.

DEAR SIR

As you are a friend to American Manufactures under proper restrictions, especially Manufactures of the domestic kind, I take the Liberty of sending you by the Post a Packett containing two Pieces of Homespun⁴ lately produced in this quarter by One who was honoured in his youth with some of your Attention and much of your kindness.

All of my Family whom you formerly knew are well. My Daughter Smith is here and has successfully gone through a perilous and painful Operation, which detains her here this Winter, from her Husband and her Family at Chenango: where one of the most gallant and skilful Officers of our Revolution is probably destined to spend the rest of his days, not in the Field of Glory, but in the hard Labours of Husbandry.

⁴ A published copy, in two volumes, of a series of lectures John Quincy Adams gave at Harvard.

I wish you Sir many happy New Years and that you may enter the next and many succeeding Years with as animating Prospects for the Public as those at present before Us. I am Sir with a long and sincere Esteem your Friend and Servant

JOHN ADAMS

Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, January 21, 1812
Excerpted from *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, pages 290–292

Monticello Jan. 21. 1812

DEAR SIR

I thank you before hand (for they are not yet arrived) for the specimens of homespun you have been so kind as to forward me by post. I doubt not their excellence, knowing how far you are advanced in these things in your quarter. [...]

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. Still we did not expect to be without rubs and difficulties; and we have had them. First the detention of the Western posts, [...] outlawing our commerce with France, and the British enforcement of the outlawry. [...]

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, [...]. I have heard with pleasure that you also retain good health, and a greater power of exercise in walking than I do. But I would rather have heard this from yourself, and that, writing a letter, like mine, full of egotisms, and of details of your health, your habits, occupations and enjoyments, [...]. No circumstances have lessened the interest I feel in these particulars respecting yourself; none have suspended for one moment my sincere esteem for you; and I now salute you with unchanged affections and respect.

TH: JEFFERSON

Note: Early on in the correspondence Adams attempted to draw Jefferson into a debate over the policies of his administration.

John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, May 1, 1812
Excerpted from *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, pages 300–301

Quincy May 1. 1812

DEAR SIR

Yesterday, I received from the Post Office, under an envelope inscribed with your hand, but without any letter, a very learned and ingenious Pamphlet, prepared by you for the Use of your Counsel, in the case of Edward Livingston against you. [...]

[...] I have run over this Pamphlet with great pleasure but must read it with more Attention. I have uniformly treated the Charges of Corruption, which I have read in Newspapers and Pamphlets and heard from the Pulpit against you and Mr. Madison with contempt and Indignation. [...] In the Measures of Administration I have neither agreed with you or Mr. Madison. Whether you or I were right Posterity must judge. I have never approved of Non Importations, Non Intercourses, or Embargoes for more than Six Weeks. I never have approved and never can approve of the Repeal of the Taxes, the Repeal of the Judiciary System, or the Neglect of the Navy. You and Mr. Madison had as good a right to your Opinions as I had to mine, and I must acknowledge the Nation was with you. But neither your Authority nor that of the Nation has convinced me. Nor, I am bold to pronounce will convince Posterity. [...]

I am still as I ever have been and ever shall be with great Esteem and regard your Friend and Se[r]vant

JOHN ADAMS

Note: Jefferson's subsequent letter ignored these criticisms and Adams gave up trying to air old grievances, and the two kept up a regular and lively correspondence. In July of 1813 Abigail broke her long silence by adding the following note at the end of her husband's letter.

John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, July 15, 1813
Excerpted from *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, pages 357–358

Quincy July 15th 1813

[...]

I shall come to the Subject of Religion, by and by. Your Friend

JOHN ADAMS

I have been looking for some time for a space in my good Husbands Letters to add the regards of an old Friend, which are still cherished and preserved through all the charges and v[ic]issitudes which have taken place since we first became acquainted, and will I trust remain as long as

A ADAMS

Thomas Jefferson to Abigail Adams, August 22, 1813
Excerpted from *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, pages 366–367

Monticello Aug. 22.13

DEAR MADAM

A kind note at the foot of Mr. Adams's letter of July 15. reminds me of the duty of saluting you with friendship and respect; a duty long suspended by the unremitting labors of public engagement, and which ought to have been sooner revived, since I am become proprietor of my own time. And yet so it is, that in no course of life have I been ever more closely pressed by business than in the present. Much of this proceeds from my own affairs; much from the calls of others; leaving little time for indulgence in my greatest of all amusements, reading. [...] However I will now take time to ask you how you do, how you have done? and to express the interest I take in whatever affects your happiness. I have been concerned to learn that, at one time you suffered much and long from rheumatism, and I can sympathise with you the more feelingly, as I have had more of it myself latterly than at any former period; and can form a truer idea of what it is in it's higher degrees. [...]

[...] Under all circumstances of health or sickness, of blessing or affliction, I tender you assurances of my sincere affection and respect; and my prayers that the hand of time and of providence may press lightly on you, till your own wishes shall withdraw you from all mortal feeling.

TH: JEFFERSON

John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, November 13, 1815
Excerpted from *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, pages 456–458

Quincy Nov. 13 1815

DEAR SIR

The fund[a]mental Article of my political Creed is, that Despotism, or unlimited Sovereignty, or absolute Power is the same in a Majority of a popular Assembly, an Aristocratical Counsel, an Oligarchical Junto and a single Emperor. Equally arbitrary cruel bloody and in every respect diabolical.

Accordingly arbitrary Power, wherever it has resided, has never failed to destroy all the records Memorials and Histories of former times which it did not like and to corrupt and interpolate such as it was cunning enough to preserve or to tolerate. We cannot therefore say with much confidence, what Knowledge or what Virtues may have prevailed in some former Ages in some quarters of the World.

Nevertheless, according to the few lights that remain to Us, We may say that the Eighteenth Century, notwithstanding all its Errors and Vices has been, of all that are past, the most honourable to human Nature. [...]

[...] I am as usual Yours

JOHN ADAMS

Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, January 11, 1816
Excerpted from *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, pages 458–461

Monticello Jan. 11. 16.

DEAR SIR

[...]

I agree with you in all it's eulogies on the 18th century. It certainly witnessed the sciences and arts, manners and morals, advanced to a higher degree than the world had ever before seen. [...] That the same light from our West⁵ seems to have spread and illuminated the very engines employed to extinguish it. It has given them a glimmering of their rights and their power. The idea of representative government has taken root and growth among them. Their masters feel it, and are saving themselves by timely offers of this modification of their own powers. Belgium, Prussia, Poland, Lombardy etc. are now

⁵ Democracy.

offered a representative organization: illusive probably at first, but it will grow into power in the end. [...] Permit me to place here my affectionate respects to Mrs. Adams, and to add for yourself the assurances of cordial friendship and esteem.

TH: JEFFERSON

Note: During the Massachusetts Constitutional Convention of 1820–1821 Adams tried unsuccessfully to attach an amendment to the Massachusetts state constitution. The amendment would have guaranteed religious freedom, a right both he and Jefferson felt was a founding principle of the country, and was supposed to have been guaranteed by the First Amendment to the US Constitution.

Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, January 22, 1821
Excerpted from *The Adams-Jefferson Papers*, pages 569–570

Monticello Jan. 22. 21

I was quite rejoiced, dear Sir, to see that you had health and spirits enough to take part in the late convention of your state for revising it's constitution, and to bear your share in it's debates and labors. The amendments of which we have as yet heard prove the advance of liberalism in the intervening period; and encourage a hope that the human mind will some day get back to the freedom it enjoyed 2000 years ago. This country, which has given to the world the example of physical liberty, owes to it that of moral emancipation also. For, as yet, it is but nominal with us. The inquisition of public opinion overwhelms in practice the freedom asserted by the laws in theory.

[...]

You see, my dear Sir, how easily we prescribe for others a cure for their difficulties, while we cannot cure our own. We must leave both, I believe, to heaven, and wrap ourselves up in the mantle of resignation, and of that friendship of which I tender to you the most sincere assurances.

TH: JEFFERSON

John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, January 23, 1825
Excerpted from *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, pages 607–608

Quincy 23rd. January 1825

MY DEAR SIR

We think ourselves possessed or at least we boast that we are so of Liberty of conscience on all subjects and of the right of free inquiry and private judgment, in all cases and yet how far are we from these exalted privileges in fact. There exists I believe throughout the whole Christian world a law which makes it blasphemy to deny or to doubt the divine inspiration of all the books from the old and new Testaments from Genesis to Revelations. [...] in England itself it is punished by boring through the tongue with a red hot poker: in America it is not much better, even in our Massachusetts which I believe upon the whole is as temperate and moderate in religious zeal as most of the States. A law was made in the latter end of the last century repealing the cruel punishments of the former laws but substituting fine and imprisonment upon all those blasphemers upon any book of the old Testament or new. [...] I think such laws a great embarrassment, great obstructions to the improvement of the human mind. [...] I wish they were repealed. The substance and essence of Christianity as I understand it is eternal and unchangeable and will bear examination forever but it has been mixed with extraneous ingredients, which I think will not bear examination and they ought to be separated.

Adieu
JOHN ADAMS

Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, March 25, 1826
The Adams-Jefferson Letters, pages 613–614

Monticello Mar. 25. 26.

DEAR SIR

My grandson Th: Jefferson Randolph, being on a visit to Boston, would think he had seen nothing were he to leave it without having seen you. Altho' I truly sympathise with you in the trouble these interruptions give, yet I must ask for him permission to pay to you his personal respects. Like other young people, he wishes to be able, in the winter nights of old age, to recount to those around him what he has heard and learnt of the Heroic age preceding his birth, and which of the Argonauts particularly he was in time to have seen. It was the lot of our early years to witness nothing but the dull monotony of colonial subservience, and of our riper ones to breast the labors and perils of working out of it. Theirs are the Halcyon calms succeeding the storm which our Argosy had so stoutly weathered. Gratify his ambition then by receiving his best bow, and my solicitude for your health by enabling him to bring me a favorable account of it. Mine is but indifferent, but not so my friendship and respect for you.

TH: JEFFERSON

John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, April 17, 1826
Excerpted from *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, page 614

Quincy April 17th. 1826

MY DEAR SIR

Your letter of March 25th. has been a cordial to me, and the more consoling as it was brought by your Grandsons, Mr. Randolph and Mr. Coolidge. Everybody connected with you is snatched up, so that I cannot get any of them to dine with me—they are always engaged. How happens it that you Virginians are all sons of Anak⁶? We New Englanders are but Pygmies by the side of Mr. Randolph. I was very much gratified with Mr. Randolph, and his conversation. Your letter is one of the most beautiful and delightful I have ever received.

[...] My love to all your family, and best wishes for your health

JOHN ADAMS.

Note: These were the last letters Jefferson and Adams sent to each other. They both died on July 4, 1826.

⁶ A biblical reference. What Adams means is that Virginians are all tall.